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STALKER OF MASSACRE TRAIL
A STIRRING NOVEL OF COVERED WAGON ADVENTURE BY
WILLIAM R. COX
TOMAHAWK RENDEZVOUS
A NOVELET OF BUCKSKIN WARRIORS
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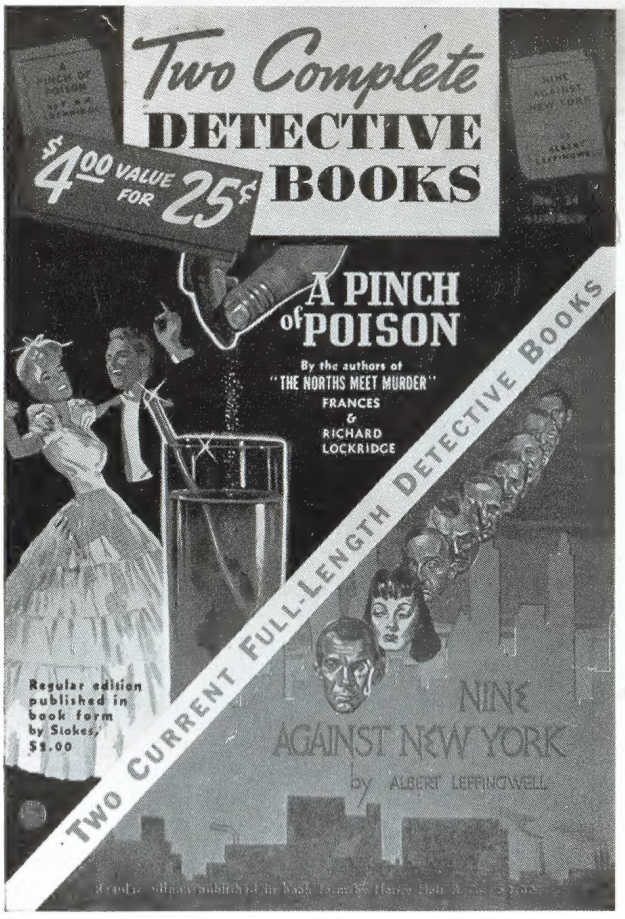

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Frontier Stories

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A GREAT NOVEL OF WAGON-TRAIN ADVENTURE

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STALKER OF MASSACRE TRAIL

A Great Novel of Covered Wagon Quest

By WILLIAM R. COX

The Mormon renegade was farthest away. He was holding that most redoubtable of weapons, a double-barreled shotgun. He was waiting his chance with calmness and dignity. Pixley was, Red thought, a very great villain . . .

Ruthless, war-hard Red Mathew left his life-long vengeance trail to save the Apache-ringed pilgrims. Only to reach, by leading their wagons to safe horizons, the raging end of his own bitter quest!

AT the rim of the Painted Desert the sun rose red and foreboding. The dusty caravan stirred; a blue-shirted Chinaman wandered toward the chuck wagon.

The gaunt herd was somnolent, grubbing for non-existent grass.

Redfern Mathew threw his left leg over the horn of his hull and rolled a cigarette with patient fingers.

The clouds of smoky danger rose on the western horizon. On the clear, thin air, it seemed to Red Mathew that he could hear the cries of the Apaches. He finished moulding the thin, brown cylinder, touched a lucifer to the end. For a long

moment he debated, concealed behind the yucca plant, his eyes going derisively over the four wagons of the caravan, the thousand head of cattle, the dozen and a half horses.

At least, he thought, they had formed a square—the cayuses were bunched and hobbled. Even if the fools had not set a guard in this hostile country, they had made a nod to possible attack. He wondered whether to ride away and let them fight it out, redskins against damfool emigrants.

Red Mathew's beard needed trimming. It was fiery, to match his nickname. It covered his hard jaw, the scar along his right cheek. It did not cover his bright, cold blue eyes, did not entirely mask the thin, cruel lips. His hawk nose was sharp and long. He was about forty, and his thick body was middle height but wide as a barn door.

He rode a sorry saddle and his clothing was ill-matched, jeans and dirty, checkered shirt. His hat brim was broken and his boots were cracked. He was now two weeks without a bath.

But the roan horse was fine and sleek, and in the worn scabbard was a heavy Sharps, and tied fast to the horn were two single-action, .45 caliber Army Colt's, and distributed about Red's person and equipment was ammunition enough to fight a small war.

The Apaches had stopped and were almost invisible now that the dust had subsided. The Chinese cook started a fire. Men climbed from their tarps and stretched. The flap of one of the wagons parted and a girl stepped down to the ground, clad in trousers and blue shirt, her long, blond hair flowing wild about her shoulders.

Red Mathew stared. The points of dust on the horizon began to kick up again. The girl washed her hands and face, very vigorously, and then the men lined up, using the same water, of course, in this practically waterless country. The girl dried herself upon a piece of sacking, straddling her legs like a boy, her back straight.

She was a pretty girl. She had blue eyes to contrast with her blond tresses, and she was tall and supple. A giant of a young man came from behind another wagon and stood beside her, and they talked animatedly. Red grunted and slowly dropped his foot to the stirrup, sitting bolt upright upon the roan. The cook chattered very brightly and the pair laughed, and a lean, middle-aged man appeared from another wagon.

IT was a peaceful scene. Red kicked the roan gently in the ribs and rode down upon it. The dust clouds were separating, making the conventional circle. The Apaches were not skulking today. They had evidently scouted the party last night and only waited for dawn because of their superstition about attacks in the dark.

He rode swiftly, now that he had started. He held his right hand high, shouted. "Indians! Close in, you fools! Can't you see the Apache?"

The big man whirled, staring. The middle-aged man's firm lips thinned as he called orders. There was no time to run off the horses of the remuda now. They were driven inside the square of wagons. Red said:

"That's a fool thing, but I reckon it's got to be done."

His voice was cold, smooth, without emotion. He stared at the middle-aged man, saying,

"I'm Red Matthew."

The man nodded, his glance taking in the run-down boots, the dilapidated hat, sure signs of the character of a man in the southwest. He said curtly:

"Thanks. You can ride and get away before they close in."

Red said, "I am aware of that. How many men have we?"

"I'm Elihu Hatt," said the man grudgingly. "There's Sam Tabor, Duff, Regan, and Holmes. Lee Chin is no good. But Pru will hold her own—you can count her."

"That's seven with you and me. Ammunition?"

"Plenty," said Eli Hatt grimly. "We been migrating away from bandits, rustlers, Injuns since Texas, two years back. We're plumb tired of it, but we got guns and bullets."

The big man and the girl came, bearing Winchesters. Sam Tabor was a clear-eyed, handsome young fellow, evidently

the straw boss of the small outfit. The girl said:

"Thank you for the warning, Mr. Mathew. We've gotten careless, I'm afraid."

She spoke well, Red thought amusedly, as though she had been to school. And Eli Hatt was not ill educated. They had probably been caught in the beef-market glut of '77, and had spent two years seeking new country in which to settle. Red shrugged. It was none of his business. If he was right clever, he would turn and outride the Apaches. There were a good many of the Indians. It might be a long battle, and Red Mathew had a journey of his own in mind.

He said, "Spread around and pick your spots. Under the wagons is best. Set up anything you can for barriers. I generally like a wheel spoke for a gun rest."

He unlimbered the Sharps and slipped to earth. Sam Tabor said, "Ain't you going to hobble your hoss?"

"General will stay by me," said Red calmly. "You'd better take your position. Here they come!"

There was time yet. He chose the eastern side of the square of wagons, taking the sun deliberately so that the others might have better vision for their shooting. The three cowhands, he saw, were ordinary frontiersmen, neither heroic nor cowardly, men who took Indian fights as a matter of course. They all disposed themselves as the sun rose above the rim of the horizon, and silence fell upon the caravan.

The Apaches rode straight ahead. There was little chance for concealment. The cactus and yucca was sparse, even here at the edge of the desert. It would be a matter of circling and deployment, Red Mathew thought, with occasional sorties by the maniac braves who sought advancement in their tribe. He watched them come, picking out a chief by his headdress. He felt the nervousness of the others within the square of the four wagons and said, without turning:

"Let them get close. Don't miss."

There were, he saw, guns among the braves, but bows and arrows were more plentiful. It would be close work. He could hear their cries now — blood-curdling, hysterical screams which congealed the desert air. They came, bronzed, riding like acrobats, almost to within range.

THEY halted, wheeled and circled, playing their game of nerves. One, bolder than the others, came inside the ring, slipping to the far side of his cayuse, aiming a carbine under the horse's neck for a wild shot.

Red said calmly, "I've got him."

He pressed gently upon the trigger of the Sharps. He peered anxiously, saw the pony stumble. The Apache rolled over and lay still. Red leveled the Sharps, held it. Another warrior made a dash for the fallen Indian. Red carefully knocked the second one off his running horse.

The first one chose this moment to leap to his feet and make an attempt for the now riderless pony. Red chuckled and fired again. The Apache leaped into the air and turned over, howling his death yell.

At Red's shoulder the girl's voice was breathless, admiring, "That was fine, cool shooting, Mr. Mathew."

He looked at her with his cold eyes. Her red lips were parted, her cheeks flushed. She was entirely unafraid. Red said:

"Watch them. They'll try a charge now."

She crawled to the next wagon, handling her Winchester as though she knew all about it. Red had time to see the jealous scowl upon Sam Tabor's face as she went away from him, then the Apache were charging.

They were brave enough. They came thundering down, almost a hundred of them, from all sides. The white men held their fire. The Apaches loosed a shower of arrows, then the guns began to bark, prematurely, with bad aim.

They were less than a hundred rods away. Red said, "One more moment! Then . . . fire!"

They were coming on. Red worked the bolt of the Sharps, watching the Indians fall. He heard the burst of firing around him, it sounded solid. The Apaches rode it out, howling, came almost to the wagons. A horse squealed horribly as an arrow pierced its flank.

Red picked up the revolvers. He held

the long barrels steady, aiming the right-hand gun with consummate coolness, reserving the other. He drove a bullet through the forehead of a grinning, charging brave, piling him under the hoofs of another's horse.

The second attacker's steed stumbled. The man described a parabola. He landed upon his feet, turned, and in one graceful, flowing motion had seized the bridle of the horse and was remounted, circling away, out of fire.

Red drew a bead, his face suddenly pale. He aimed at the exact center of the man's back. He pulled the trigger.

The gun snapped uselessly. It was empty. For once, Red had forgotten to count shots. He changed hands with all the speed he could muster. He looked for another shot at the fleeing man.

It was too late. It was too late to kill any of the attacking band. They had followed Red's intended victim, drawing off. They were gathering beyond rifle shot in another few moments, and the man whom Red had missed was in their center.

Prudence Hatt turned a powder-stained, pale face toward Red. She said in flat accents, "That man—he was white!"

Red said thickly, "I almost had him."

"A white man!" she cried. "He's the leader!"

Red wiped the sweat from his forehead. His pulse dropped back to a normal beat. He said, "Simon Girty was white, and there have been others."

"Riding with murdering Apaches!" She could not believe it. She told the others at once, and muttered threats went up. The Apaches drew off, leaving their dead piled about the wagons. Red hunched, watching them, dissembling the eagerness of hatred which boiled within him.

He had come a long way to get this white man who rode with Apaches. There were others he must seek, too, but this one would do for a start. He rested on his haunches, mechanically cleaning his rifle, reloading his revolvers.

IT was night, and the Apaches had not returned. Eli Hatt said, "Dare we move in the darkness?"

"I would advise waiting until morning," said Red.

"They won't attack at night," Sam Tabor insisted. "We can be out of this desert, on our way to Wyoming, in a few hours. I say, move on!"

Red Mathew sat back, indifferent. "Wyoming? You all are a far piece from Wyoming."

"We came from Texas," said Eli Hatt grimly. "We went west, into Arizona, seeking peace. Two years, and there has been no peace, and the cattle do not increase as they should. A man sold me some ground in Wyoming. A man I know and can trust. We are going to homestead more land—all of us. The Texans can have the cattle country of the southwest. I see no happiness there."

He was a gentle man, with a kindly, smooth face. He could fight, if necessary, Red thought, but he desired a peaceful existence. The girl said:

"Father is right. We have driven the remainder of our herd this far, why not to Wyoming?"

"Mormons," said Red succinctly. "You're headed for Utah."

"We've known members of the Latter Day Saints," said Eli Hatt gravely. "They have proved good neighbors more than once."

"Utah is their stamping ground," said Red. "Brigham Young is dead and the Congress is after them. They do not like gentiles nowadays."

"I will chance the Mormons," said Eli Hatt with dignity. "I have known nothing but violence from the Christians of Texas and Arizona. Rustlers and bad men have despoiled my cattle, threatened my life. What more can Mormons do?"

Sam Tabor said, "I still say we should move on. Right now."

Red got up and moved toward his horse. "Well, it's none of my business. I'll be going along."

"No," said Pru. "Don't leave us! Aren't you going our way? Couldn't—couldn't you come along with us?"

Tabor's face flushed a deep red, his eyes angry. Duff, Regan, and Holmes moved behind their straw boss, glancing with distaste at Red's fiery whiskers, his ragged clothing. They thought him a vagrant, a wanderer who might just as well plunder them as fight the Apache on their side.

Eli Hatt said gently, "I was about to ask you that myself, Mathew. You seem —at loose ends. Why don't you join us?"

It was probably the enmity of Tabor, appealing to his sense of humor, which decided Red. He said abruptly, "I'm a lone wolf, generally speaking. But if you move tonight—I'll accompany you a ways. I don't think it will be very safe."

He stared at Tabor, sneering a little. He turned his hard, blue eyes upon the other men, transfixing each in turn. They muttered and turned away, all except the straw boss.

They hitched up the horses and rounded up the remuda. The four riders went out to start the herd. Eli took the reins of one wagon, Holmes of another, the girl the third, and the Chinaman the chuck wagon. They knew their business from bitter experience, Red perceived. They had the drive started in jig time.

He rode the roan on the outer point of the herd for a while, watching sharply for signs of Apaches. It was bright enough under the stars to give them a chance. Tabor passed him once, and called:

"You know Injuns won't attack at night. Why scare people, Mathew? Anybody'd think you wanted us to delay."

Red said, "Go along, you dumb jake. You saw the white renegade, didn't you?"

He wasted no further words upon the sullen, tall foreman. He rode in a swift circle around the slowly moving herd, then back to the wagons.

They plodded along through the hours without incident.

Slouching in the worn saddle, Red gave himself over to deep thought. The obvious object of the Apaches would be the cattle, then the horses, lastly a massacre. But they had lost braves, they knew the party was well-armed.

APACHES were not that courageous, Red knew. Ordinarily, they would draw off and search for other victims. They preferred the odds upon their side. Yet he had a premonition. It centered upon the white man.

He was riding behind the herd when he heard the noise. There was movement to the east, among a pile of rock which nature had strewn carelessly over the desert's edge. Without words, he brought the roan to a trot, then to a dead run.

He came up along the herd and one of the men called to him. He did not answer. He drew his revolvers and placed them in his belt. He lay low on the horse's back and rode like the wind.

No use to call the men from the herd. They would need to be watchful to combat a stampede. Red made straight for the wagons.

The renegade had returned, he saw at once. His hunch had been right. The white man and a half dozen hardy braves were riding unshod steeds. They were converging in utter silence upon the third wagon. They were after the girl!

Red was a little late, he knew immediately. They were closer than he had thought. Even as he watched, an Apache swung from the bare back of his pony and climbed the hub of the wagon wheel. Holmes must be asleep—or dead, already.

Red had to take a chance. He leveled a revolver and fired. He saw the Apache go down, heard the concerted yells of the band. He heard Eli Hatt bellow an order. Prudence's head stuck out, the blond hair a striking target in the starlight.

"Get back!" Red shouted at her. He unlimbered another shot. The white man was waving his arms, and then Red saw other Apaches beyond, skilfully placed as a rear guard.

It had been shrewdly planned. The first half dozen turned now, circling in their time-honored style. The white man ordered up his reinforcements. He had been able to recruit a score of Indians despite their belief that death in the night means an eternity of darkness in the Happy Hunting Ground.

Red shouted. "Up! Up! Fire at will!"

Guns crackled. The men had closed in, Duff and Regan and Tabor. They came riding hard, charging the redskins. Fire burst from among the rocks and Duff reeled in his saddle, crashed to the ground.

Red bawled, "Back up, you idiots! Outspan the wagons and form!"

At the military command which came unbidden from his throat, the Chinaman, Eli, and the girl came down from the wagons, the men swerved their horses, firing at the Apaches. Tabor rode down

a brown warrior, shot him in the face, turned, and came back.

Red guided the roan with his knees, going counterclockwise to the circling attackers. Again and again he accounted for an enemy, but always he closed in, deliberately seeking to draw them off the wagons with continuous fire. His revolvers were emptied. He replaced them in his belt and drew the Sharps. Holding it under his right arm, he used it as a carbine, trying for a shot at the white renegade among the rocks.

Three Apaches rode out. They formed a triangle, coming in upon Red. He was forced to take them one at a time. They pulled him away and then he saw the tight little band go in for the kill at the wagons.

HE shot one Indian's skull away at close range with the powerful Sharps. He saw the white bandit leading his quintet to the wagons, still not properly squared. He saw Duff, on the ground, wounded, fire into the group, saw one Indian go down.

He hastily picked off the second of his three attackers. The remaining one was between him and the wagons. Red took his time, careful not to place a bullet among the people of his own party. He got the brave in the body and spurred the foam-flecked roan.

Eli Hatt was backed against a wagon wheel, his rifle clubbed, laying about him. Tabor was down, bleeding. Holmes was lying across the wagon seat, and the Chinaman was swinging a butcher's cleaver wildly, without harm to anyone.

Red rode harder. The white man had already got his hands on Pru, tearing the gun from her. Two Indians were leaping to help in the abduction. Red came wing-ing through, his roan gallantly avoiding the men on the ground.

He could not shoot now without endangering the others. He swung loosely in the saddle, reversing his heavy Sharps. He was amazingly strong, handling the gun as though it were a light club. He aimed at the white renegade's head, but missed, catching one of the Apache alongside the jaw, breaking his neck with the blow.

He came down off the horse in one motion, hanging onto the Sharps. He saw Eli Hatt stumble and fall. The white man turned to face him for one instant.

He was a big man, black whiskers disguising most of his face. He was stripped, like the Indians, to a breech clout, and muscles were corded on his belly and in his great arms. For a second he clung to Pru, glaring at Red.

Pru screamed. "Behind you!"

Red ducked and sidestepped. An Indian bearing a long knife slid past him. Without hesitation Red bounced the rifle butt on the skull of the man.

He swung back, starting for the white renegade. Prudence twisted like an eel, broke loose, her shirt tearing off one white shoulder. Red crouched, plunging forward. There were three rapid shots from behind him.

An Indian howled mournfully, and the white man moved. He leaped backwards, covering a dozen feet in the powerful jump. He darted past the wagon, running like a deer. He swung aboard a pony held by a waiting brave. There was a soft beat of hoofs on the sand and the sound of a gun, and then all was still.

Tabor sat up, blood streaming from a cut on his head, both his six-guns smoking. "Shot three of 'em," he muttered. "That'll finish 'em. Holmes come to."

Holmes was aiming a carbine at the departing band. He had recovered consciousness and was again in action. His fire and Tabor's had caused the withdrawal, Red knew. Holmes seemed only slightly wounded.

Red leaned on the barrel of the Sharps and looked around. Hatt was alive. Regan was unconscious, but breathing. From outside, Duff called,

"I'm—I'm done, boys!"

Pru ran out to succor the wounded man, but Duff was hard hit, Red knew. There were corpses of the Apaches strewn about. Cold anger rose in him. He drew his knife and went forward, bending over the nearest Indian. He made quick gestures, running the keen blade around the scalp.

Methodically he went from one to the other, tearing the oily black scalp locks loose, gathering the gory relics into his left hand.

Eli Hatt staggered up and said, "Are you mad, Mathew?"

"No," said Red. "I'm sending them

hairless and broken to their Happy Hunting Ground. I'm protecting us from another attack. When they find these—they'll leave us alone."

The man turned away and leaned, sick, against the wagon. Red went stoically about his task, under the staring, unbelieving, wide eyes of Prudence, who held the dying head of Duff in her lap and sobbed soundlessly. Sam Tabor cursed beneath his breath, but in his eyes was grudging admiration.

II

ELI HATT stood upon the edge of the deep, twisting canyon with hopelessness in every lineament. "We cannot even get the wagons through! The cattle will never make it!"

Utah lay about them, awe-inspiring, mountain piling upon towering peak. Sam Tabor scratched his head, then turned furiously upon Red Mathew. "You knew this! You been this way before!"

Red sat upon the roan, lounging, his face imperturbable. He said, "Of course."

They had spoken little to him since the scalping incident; no one had failed to show distaste. Pru, sitting in the wagon, had scarcely noticed him during the weeks of travel. He watched them sardonically, wondering why he had not ridden on, leaving them to their foolishness.

Eli Hatt said, "What are we to do?"

Tabor glowered, and the other riders, Regan and Holmes, did not disguise their dislike. Red was too hard for them, too self-sufficient, too aloof. His fibre seemed of rock, and every move he made was studied. Even his slovenliness was somehow extraordinary. They did not understand him—they tolerated him only because of his fighting ability and his knowledge of the country.

He had seen them through a stampede, since the Apache affair, and through a boiling river which they feared to essay for four days, until he had shown them how. He had quietly steered them through ravines, along the banks of streams uncharted upon their worthless maps. He had led them, now, into southeastern Utah, where they could not pass with wagons and cattle, save through the Skillet.

He pondered now, whether or not he should take the trouble to guide them further. Eli Hatt said in his gentle voice,

"You are the man among us who knows. Can you help us, Mathew?"

After a moment Red said, "If you follow me, it is at your own peril. The way is hard, and many of your cattle will be lost. There are Mormons. . . ."

"Nobody's scared!" said Tabor disgustedly. "You show us through. I'll take care of the Saints."

Red said directly to Hatt, "You want to go through?"

"We must," said Hatt.

"You can winter here," said Red. "You can go around into Colorado and pick up the trail. It's a long ways, but it's a heap safer. You'd be safe here, and your beeves are grazing good. There's grass in the canyon, and a mesa further along if you want to drive them up there."

Eli Hatt said, "We want to get to Wyoming and claim our land. We want to get home."

There was a passionate intensity in the middle-aged man's voice. Red said, "Make camp. I can lead you through."

He spread his tarp away from the others, as usual, after the meal. He had never essayed the Skillet with a herd of cattle, but it could be done. There was a narrow fissure, at the end of Stark Canyon, and then there was a river, unnamed as far as he knew, narrow but swift. Beyond that was rocky going, but it could be done by fearless men and tough Texas cattle.

Beyond that he could leave them and perform his own errand. It was time, and past time, that he begin the work. Twenty years—twenty-two years—before, he had sworn to come back to Utah.

The fates had done many things to Redfern Mathew since he was eighteen, and none of them had directed his steps hither. His life, in retrospect, was inconceivable. That so much could have happened to him in two decades seemed impossible.

Two decades—not counting the last two years, that was. The last twenty-four months had been the worst. Until then, it had seemed fair enough, tilting against the world, taking what he wanted. But when the break came, he could not take the punishment, after all, and then it had been liquor and the edges of the frontier and Devil take the hindmost—which was Red-

fern Mathew. The Devil had been quick, too!

He rolled a cigarette, sitting cross-legged on the tarp. The sky was full of stars, so close down it seemed that he might pick one. He stared at them, and a shadow fell across him. It was Prudence Hatt, her feet planted apart, frowning down upon him. She said,

"You are a strange man, Red Mathew."

HE moved over and she seated herself, reluctantly, yet with purpose. She said, "How are you going to take us through this wild, mountainous country?"

He could see Tabor and Hatt, talking together, Tabor's head ever turning jealously to watch. Red laughed mirthlessly.

"None of you trust me, yet you can't do without me. Why ask such a question? If I wished to lie, I could tell you anything."

She said unexpectedly, "You have a strange way of speaking, Red. Sometimes like an educated man, sometimes like a cowboy."

"I'm a strange man," he mocked her. "A vagabond. A killer. A scalper of Apaches."

She said stoically, "They did not bother us again. You were right, I suppose. It —it seemed so horrible at the time. . . ."

After a moment she said, "If you won't tell me the route, how about Mormons? Do we pass a settlement?"

"Inevitably," said Red. "They are everywhere. The Mormons are very industrious people."

"You hate them," she decided. "I wonder why? They have been horribly persecuted. Now that the story of the Great Meadows massacre has been definitely disproven, there is really nothing against them."

"Disproven?" Red's eyebrows went up. He looked more than ever like a ruddy devil. "What makes you think so?"

She said, "It was twenty-two years ago, wasn't it? They were supposed to have tricked a wagon train out of its arms, then massacred one hundred and twenty men, women, and children. Is that a white man's trick? The Indians did it. Everyone admits it nowadays."

"The Mormons are good missionaries. They say often enough that they did not do it—everyone believes it. But there are good Mormons and bad Mormons like every other sect. And perhaps the good ones would like to forget some things." Red's whiskers bristled in the firelight, his cold blue eyes were like sapphires. "The littlest children, the ones who could not remember—they were saved. Do Indians save little children?"

The girl shook her head. "You're prejudiced, Red. I hope we do not meet any Mormons. But if we must, I hope you will not start fighting with them."

There was a silence between them. Tabor was up now, walking restlessly about, staring over at them. The girl's father had gone to bed. There was no need of a watch here, as the Piutes and Shoshones were not warlike. Red said,

"I will tell you about the Skillet, then you may change your mind about going. The others are too stubborn, but maybe you have some sense."

She stared at the challenge in his voice, then accepted it. He drew her a map with a twig. She studied it, listened to his description of the dangers. He ended, "Beyond here is the first Mormon settlement, and beyond that you can make fair progress —if we get through."

She stood up. She put her small hands in the pockets of her dungarees and said, "It can be done. I say do it."

He shrugged. "Very well."

"It may not be sensible," she went on. "It may kill us all. But Father must have a home. Since Mother died he has wandered, and men have been unkind to him. In Wyoming there is a new life for him—he is only fifty. The rest of us—we're young. We'll be all right. But I want Father to get through. A man deserves some peace at the end of the trail."

She strode away without a look behind, and Tabor hastened to meet her and lead her to the wagon in which she slept. She stopped to say a few words with the straw boss, and Red imagined she was reassuring him that all was well and that they would get through.

Red pulled the edges of the tarp over him and nestled his head upon the saddle which was his pillow. He chuckled once, then he thought how beautiful and straight and slim Prudence was, and how she could look you in the eye like a man and speak her thoughts without quibbling. She was

a rare girl, he knew, and she was not for the likes of Redfern Mathew.

HE got them down into Stark Canyon. It was an insane thing, he knew, every step of the way, but single-handed he forced them to it. There were places where the cows had to go two by two, where even the horses were hard put to it to find footing. There were stony places, where the wagons cast their iron tires, and broke springs, and had to be repaired.

There were twisting gullies, then there was a dry gulch, and a day without sight of the sky, so thick were the trees on the high bank above them. It was a wondrous and beautiful country, but it was not a place for such a caravan.

Tabor grew thin, Eli Hatt rocked with weariness, the two remaining drivers were overworked to exhaustion. Nerves grew ragged. The day before they would come to the Skillet, Sam Tabor burst forth.

"I don't believe he can get us through! I believe he is leading us into a trap! He's a tricky devil, that man!"

Red got wearily down from the roan. This had been coming on since the first night Pru had talked with him. Since that time she had been kind in her speech, had sought him out on other occasions in the evening. Every step of the way Tabor had hated him, and everyone knew it. Regan and Holmes, bearded, gaunt, rode up and stopped. Eli Hatt called from up front,

"Sam! Mathew! No fighting!"

Tabor was on the ground, lurching forward, his face wild with rage. Prudence stood up on the dashboard of the wagon to watch, but she said nothing. Red waited.

Tabor swung his long arms. He was a head taller and fifteen years younger than Red. He waded in, oblivious of everything but his hatred.

When he was within arm's length, Red moved. He ducked under the roundhouse punches of the big man. He seized Tabor by the right knee, bent his back and lifted. The tall foreman reeled, sailed from his feet. He pitched headlong into a mesquite bush and hung there.

In a moment he had fought himself free. Scratched, disheveled, seeing scarlet, he roared forward. Almost patiently Red moved about, keeping away from the heavy blows. Tabor raised one fist like a hammer, seeking to bring it down upon Red's skull with force to fell an ox.

Red side-stepped adeptly. His left fist curled in a sharp, arching blow. It sunk in at the base of Tabor's jaw. The big man fell forward on his face and lay still.

Regan and Holmes came down off their horses, sidling in to take up the fight. Red stepped back and drew a gun from his shirt front. He said, in a voice cold as ice:

"Pick him up and put him in the wagon. And don't make a bad move or I'll shoot the both of you."

For a moment no one moved. Then the two men bent and gingerly lifted the head and feet of the fallen foreman. Red remounted the roan and rode ahead. When he passed Pru's wagon he nodded and said,

"That will cool him off for a while. I was careful not to hurt him."

She said steadily, "You were right again. But you're very brutal, aren't you?"

He bowed and rode ahead to comfort Eli Hatt.

The father of Prudence shook his head, wearily, sorrowfully. "I don't hold with violence. But Sam's been techy for a long time. This is a hard journey, Mathew. We elected for it, and we're getting it."

Red said, "I wanted to tell you. It's almost over."

"Praise be!" said Hatt. "I'll speak to Tabor. There'll be no more trouble."

"Just keep steady," said Red.

They kept down the gulch and came to a camping site. The next morning they were off at dawn. Tabor appeared, his jaw slightly swollen, but said nothing. He did not look at Red, but performed his duties without complaint. Evidently mild Eli Hatt could speak strongly.

THE cattle were footsore, many would not get through, Red knew. It was afternoon when they came to the opening at the end of the canyon, the Skillet itself. It was nothing but a narrow pasageway through the mountains. The trick was, as Red told them, to find the right canyon down which to pass to find it, the way they had already come under his guidance. The worst was over.

The cattle smelled the water ahead and were eager. Red rode with the men, herd-

ing them into a circle, getting the leaders through the slot two by two. The long-suffering herd was in pitiful shape, down to skin and bones. The men rode carefully on the loose shale, but did not relinquish a moment's vigilance.

It was strange the way these rough men guarded the cattle which did not even belong to them, Red thought. They were ordinary men, Tabor and Holmes and Regan. They were, in some respects, less than ordinary. Their suspicions were close to the surface, their language and manners were bad, they were quick to anger over trifles. Perhaps there were worse spots in their pasts—cattle-rustling, horse-stealing were common enough in the mid-seventies throughout the Southwest.

Yet they were tight-mouthed, loyal, expert, painstaking in their efforts to get the herd through the Skillet. Over the hard, narrow path they drove the cattle, each man doing the work of two. Down to the un-named river, through the long course of that terrible day no man faltered.

They camped on the bank that night, and the narrow stream hissed and boiled over rocks, tearing its way down the canyon. Eli Hatt said thoughtfully.

"You say we must cross this river?"

Red nodded. That way only, he knew, would bring them out to the trail the Mormons had made, years before. He saw Sam Tabor, squatting cross-legged in the background, staring as always at the wagon which held Prudence Hatt. Red said,

"If you follow the river, you'll come to a dead end of rock hundreds of feet high—a sheer cliff. Cross here, and pretty soon there will be level ground—and settlements."

"You know this country well," said Hatt. "Have you been through lately?"

"No," said Red briefly.

"But you are sure?" persisted Hatt. "Tabor thinks there is another way out."

Red said patiently, "Tabor is a fool. It is twenty-odd years since I was here—but I have had word of this country many times."

"And the Mormons? You know them, also?"

Red closed his tight lips behind the beard. "Yes."

"Twenty-two years, you said," Eli repeated gently.

"I did not say twenty-two years!" Red stood up, reached for his bed roll. "I'll thank you to leave me alone, Hatt! After we cross the river you may go your own way!"

The kindly man said nothing. Red took his roll to a place underneath a spreading, gnarled oak and lay down. He saw Pru come from the wagon, saw them all gather out of his earshot to talk it over. They were frightened by the sound of the water, he knew. He shrugged and composed himself for sleep, leaving them to their worries. He would be glad indeed to be rid of them, he thought grimly.

He lifted his head once, stealthily, to catch a glimpse of Prudence's long, freshly-brushed blond hair. His hand crept to the scar beneath his beard on the right side of his face. Yes—even Pru, who was not for him. He'd be glad to leave them all, to return to his long overdue errand into Utah.

He repeated it to himself several times before he fell into slumber—and still had not quite convinced himself. . . .

IN the morning he ate in silence and apart from the others. The roan horse nickered, and he washed his tin plate in the river which ran so swiftly while the horse drank beside him. He saddled and, without speaking to anyone in the party, rode upstream along the bank for half a mile.

At sight of the sharp bend in the river he grinned. It was just as he remembered. He could distinguish the shelf of rock, not over three feet below the boiling surface of the water.

It was not a safe ford, but it was negotiable. He spurred the roan, and the intelligent animal cautiously entered the stream. Foot by foot, bracing itself against the current which pulled at man and beast, they went across.

At midstream the roan was belly deep, but he never paused. Forging ahead, he made a quick step upward, found a shallower place. Red, his eyes intent upon the water, striving to judge its exact speed and strength, did not see the men in the path beyond.

The roan nickered, making a last, splashing try for the bank. Red's head came up, his right hand streaked to his belt. Three men held shotguns, aimed straight at him,

sitting their horses like three graven images.

Red drew the .45, held it low, on the pommel of the saddle. The roan horse stood motionless on the edge of the stream, water dripping from him as from his rider. For a moment there was no sound save the twittering of a foolish bird in the trees above.

The three men were clad in homespun; their spade beards were neatly trimmed; they wore low-heeled boots and wide, flat-crowned hats. The biggest of them was a pace or two in advance of the others. He was a dark-visaged man with light blue eyes of startling brightness. He said.

"Peace, stranger!"

Red lounged in the saddle and drawled. "Peace with or without those guns?"

"Either way, brother," said the big man.

"There's a party behind me," said Red. "We want to cross and go through."

The other two men shifted and shook their guns restlessly. "Gentiles!"

"Of course, gentiles," said the thin man. "It has been written, has it not? They will come like the locusts."

"They will overrun us!" said the leader.

The third man, who had not yet spoken, said, "Wait. How do we know this fellow is a gentile?"

"He has not given a sign," said the leader impatiently.

"I am a gentile," said Red coolly. "These friends of mine want only to go through to Wyoming."

"With cattle!" said the thin man. "Tics and fever, and us already suffering like we are."

The leader's voice boomed, "I am Bishop Nephi Cowderey. Your party cannot come through, brother. There is fever in Soladi."

"Well!" said Red. "The Bishop himself, eh? You had advance notice of our coming, didn't you? Joel Pixley has ridden in, then?"

The mild man said, "What do you know of Brother Pixley?"

"I wish to see him," said Red. "Allow my party to go through, and I will remain as hostage that they do no harm. They are peaceful people. They carry no illness."

He holstered the gun ostentatiously, noted that the mild-mannered man replaced his weapon in its scabbard. Red rode closer, and the Bishop said grudgingly,

"This is Brother Seth Cavan and Brother Moroni Tanner. We have illness in the town of Soladi. It is true that Joel Pixley came through last night. What do you know of him?"

"That's twice you all have asked that," countered Red.

"Who are you?" demanded Moroni Tanner, the lean man.

"My name is Redfern Mathew," said Red steadily. "I have been, among other things, a doctor of medicine."

Bishop Cowderey turned pale. He turned in his saddle and surveyed the other two, his upraised hand trembling. His voice was sepulchral. "Lo! It has happened, even as it was prophesied in the vision! A doctor!"

Even the thin, fanatic-eyed Tanner was impressed. Red bowed to them and said,

"I will bring up my party. They go through. I remain. Is that satisfactory?"

"Indeed," stammered Seth Cavan. "Indeed, we are fortunate!"

Without further parley, Red turned and re-forded the stream. His face was rigid as rock, within him the nerves were taut as piano wires. He went back to the Hatt caravan as quickly as the horse could carry him.

III

THEY were ready to move, the wagons hitched, the men saddled and spurred. Red faced them, sitting the roan, leaning forward to impress them with his words. He said,

"There is fever in Soladi, the town ahead. No doubt it is typhoid. The elders whom I met are frightened. We are very fortunate—they will allow you to go straight through. Once beyond the settlements, you will be safe enough."

"We?" echoed Eli Hatt. "What of you?"

"I stay behind," said Red. "I have business here."

Sam Tabor said, "That's good enough for me. Let's start."

Prudence was astride a black mare, to help with the cattle. She rode close and said, "Red, what are you planning? Why do you stay here?"

"I promised to help with the fever," said Red.

She stared at him. "You? Nurse sick people?"

He smiled with the left side of his face. "I've had some experience."

Pru shook her blond head. "It is hard to trust you fully, Red Mathew. Yet always you have been able, at length, to prove your strange statements."

"When I fail," said Red, "you may join Tabor and the others in hating me. Until then. . . ."

She faced him, her eyes steady. "Until then?"

"We shall proceed," he ended gravely. "See? Tabor is already urging the first of the cattle into the water."

There were beeves too weak to breast the ford. Tabor and Holmes and Regan whirled their ropes, rescuing the wild-eyed steers caught in the swift current whenever they could manage. Red contented himself with riding the point, forcing the beasts to the taking-off spot, keeping them from trying to enter the water where the water was too deep.

Upon the other side the three Mormons sat, solemn, almost disinterested in the struggles of the emigrants. Eli Hatt, sweating, breathless, worked with his men. Cattle were swept away in tens, making it impossible to rescue all, but the strongest, best steers got across.

The wagons were more difficult, but Red took the reins of one, Tabor another, and held the horses firm, leading them by the heads. One by one they made it, until the entire caravan was drawn up before the stern gaze of the Mormons who still sat, watching.

The roan danced a little, as though satisfied with his day's work, and Red said to the silent trio, "Will you lead us to your town?"

Moroni Tanner's fanatical eyes flickered, the Bishop hesitated, but Seth Cavan said eagerly, "We gave you our promise!"

The others turned reluctantly and rode up the slanting, wide trail. Red motioned the Hatt contingent to follow, rode ahead to set himself at the heels of the Mormons. He heard Sam Tabor mutter to Holmes and Regan:

"I don't see no sense in taking water from those birds! If we showed our guns they'd back down!"

For once the two cowhands were silent. Red nodded grimly to himself. Perhaps Regan and Holmes had heard tales. Perhaps they had sense enough to realize the danger of attempting at this time to pass through Mormon territory.

Eli Hatt, as always, was calm, accepting Red's leadership. Prudence had returned to her wagon and was eagerly looking forward to the comforts of a town. The procession reached the top of the hill, and the slope which ran down to the valley was green, so that the cattle lowed and began cropping grass. Bishop Cowderey stared askance, but Seth Cavan said:

"We have only domestic beasts. There is plenty of grazing land left."

Red nodded. His eyes were for the town. It was as he expected, perfectly laid out in the valley. The streets were straight and wide, the sidewalks boarded carefully. Even from this distance neatness and cleanliness were apparent.

THE MORMONS, he knew, were the most industrious people on the continent. Their colonies were inevitably shrewdly located, usually healthy in every aspect. Their women were workers—plural marriage had at least the virtue of keeping brothels and dance halls from the environs of their settlements. No saloons were allowed under the strict laws of the outlying districts, although Salt Lake City was crumbling slowly under the migrations of the gentiles, he had heard.

Still, there would be unrest. Brigham Young was dead, and aging President Taylor was no man to fill the shoes of the stern, great Mormon leader. Federal legislation was threatened against the sealed wives of the leaders—for Joseph Smith had made a terrible mistake when he "allowed" this "vision" to be made known to the Apostles of the Latter Day Saints. Yes, Red thought, looking down upon the too quiet, peaceful town of Soladi, polygamy would finish the bitter-handed rule of the Apostles. Although only the favored few could practice it, the entire Mormon people would be castigated by the nation for this flouting of gentile law. And, he concluded ironically, in a country dedicated to religious liberty, the Mormons would find persecution worse than the British had ever visited upon Pilgrim Fathers!

Prudence's wagon drew close. The girl called, "Red! It is beautiful! See what they have done! What a wonderful people they must be!"

Seth Cavan's face softened, but the other pair of Mormons conferred briefly aside, then turned to Red. The Bishop said,

"You will camp here, of course."

"Over upon that flat," said Red, pointing. There was a slight elevation in the lateral plain at the end of the valley leading north. There were large rocks piled there, and beyond was a pass through the mountains of the country.

Tanner scowled, but Cavan said, "That is a good place. Will you come into town, Brother Mathew? There is need for you."

Red said, "I will go down with you, at once. Let me give directions to my friends."

He rode over and spoke with Eli Hatt. He said, "Make straight for that plain. Place your wagons strategically. Do not appear to have a guard—but have one! And by no means do any one of you come into town until I have returned."

Hatt said, "Surely these men are friendly. They guided us here!"

"If I could send you ahead without delay, I would," said Red impatiently. "You'll have to camp overnight, so get to it! Pronto!"

Once again his voice whipped, like that of an officer directing soldiery. Eli Hatt looked wonderingly at the hard blue eyes, the hawk nose of this strange man, then bowed his assent to the directions. The caravan got creakingly under way; the remaining herd of cattle slowly munched its way across the grass.

Seth Cavan rode by the side of the roan, but Red noted that Bishop Cowderey and Moroni Tanner stayed at the rear, as though suspecting treachery of some kind. Cavan said,

"My daughter has some skill at herbs and has been working very hard. There is no one else. We sent for help to Salt Lake City, but none is yet forthcoming."

Red said, "Have you ice?"

"Praise be, yes!" said Cavan. "In a storehouse."

"There is not much we can do if it is typhoid," Red said, half to himself. "Careful attention, cold sponges. How many cases have you?"

"A dozen," said Cavan despairingly. "The Bishop had gone to the river, hoping for a revelation, when you came. He was about to pray and we to watch . . ."

"Revelations will not cure a fever," said Red bluntly. "Has there been a laying on of hands?"

The Bishop spurred forward. His voice was harsh. "You seem to know much of our beliefs, stranger. Could it be that you're one of them apostates? If so, you are damned and cannot come among our people!"

RED stopped and stared at the bearded man. He said, "I am not, and never will be, a member of the Latter Day Saints. Does that satisfy you, Bishop Cowderey?"

The big man muttered, but returned to the side of the slant-eyed Tanner. Cavan said,

"Many people know the miracles of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, sir. The Bishop is wrought up. There have been. . . ." He checked himself.

Red did not appear to notice the interruption. He said, "I must see the most advanced case at once. Let us go there."

"Surely you will want to—to clean yourself and dress!" exclaimed Cavan, looking askance at Red's fantastic costume, at the bristling, unkempt whiskers.

Red laughed shortly. "So as not to frighten the patients? Perhaps you are right. Can you fit me?"

"Of course," said Cavan hesitatingly. "Of course. . . ."

They rode into town. The houses were of frame, neatly carpentered, even in some cases painted. The roofs were staunch and the windows carefully fitted. Two women started from their doorways, caught sight of Red and retreated in confusion. Thereafter he saw no one, the streets clearing at their approach. Mormon discipline was perfect, Red recognized, keeping everyone out of the way until the Bishop had given the word.

Seth Cavan's house was large and well-built. A strong-bodied woman of perhaps fifty greeted them, and was introduced as his wife. A quick glance showed Red

that there were but two bedrooms. He had, he realized at once, probably come upon a Mormon who did not believe in plural marriage.

Mistress Cavan said, "Mary is at the McBrides'. They say Brother Tom is in a bad way, Seth."

"Find clothing for this man," said Seth quietly. "He will help us."

Without further ado the woman bustled about, producing garments. There was a pair of black pantaloons, a soft, white shirt, complete with black tie. There was even a pair of Mormon-made soft shoes which would do. Red grinned beneath his beard and repaired quickly to the wash house.

An hour later he walked into the room, and Seth Cavan rose from a barrel chair and stared. The wide shoulders cramped a little in the coat, but something had added height and dignity to Red Mathew. The scar on the right side of his face was almost distinguished. It was a jagged, white scar, reaching from his ear to the point of the chin, puckered and ugly, but without twisting his strong features.

His face was slightly swollen from the razoring, but his skin was pink and smooth. His hands, carefully soaped, were stubby, but strong as vises. His long red hair still hung to his shoulders, but the texture was silky. Cavan said weakly,

"Clothes do not the man make—but a razor is a help! Sir, you look handsome!"

Mistress Cavan's hands went ceilingward. "Praise be, a doctor in the flesh. He looks the part, Seth!"

Red laughed, buckling his six-gun around his waist. "In two years, ma'am, I've not paused for a shave. May we go at once to the patient? These fevers—they do not wait."

They walked down the street, and the Bishop and Moroni Tanner were awaiting them. Their stares at Red were scarcely polite, but they held their tongues. They were sitting in judgment, Red knew. They would watch him like a hawk, now.

The McBride house was a cottage on a side street, the abode of humble people. Red walked in at the door with measured tread.

There was a sitting room, and a girl rose from a chair. She was raven-haired, tall, full-bodied. She wore a simple gray gown of some material which fell straight to her ankles. She had deep, violet-colored eyes which stared straight at Red.

Seth said, "This is our daughter. The patient is in the next room."

There were four people in the room, gathered around a bed upon which a man tossed and groaned and muttered. Red stood still in the doorway and listened. The man was delirious.

IN the front room he heard the Bishop and Tanner enter, heard the latter say, "There is a devil in Brother Tom McBride. It should be cast out. Doctors are foolishness. Joseph said . . ."

"Hush, you fool!" said a deep feminine voice. Without turning, Red knew it was the girl who had spoken.

"Sister Mary," whined Tanner, "I will have you keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"Brother Tanner, I will have you shut your mouth in this house! I am nursing here!"

Red grinned privately, remembered that he no longer had his concealing beard, and straightened his face. He surveyed the four people, an old woman, a middle-aged one, and two fearful men. He said courteously:

"Please go outside and let the nurse only come in."

He waited until they had gone before he lifted a shade enough to gain light. The door closed behind him, opened, closed again. Red said, almost in a whisper:

"Typhoid, all right. Not much doubt."

There was a moment's silence. Then the girl's strong voice said, "It must be endured. What can I do to help?"

The sheet, at least, was clean. Red pulled it aside. The man's abdomen was distended. He investigated further, rather gingerly. There were rose spots on the man's skin. The fever was raging. It was indubitably typhoid.

Red said, "Ice. Sponge him. It will take two hours or more to reduce the temperature."

The girl said, "Are you—what may I call you, sir?"

Red turned. She already had her hand on the doorlatch to perform her errand. He said, "Call me 'Red.'"

Without his beard, his grin was engag-

ing. She flushed, went hastily through the door. From a wrapped oilskin package Red took a clinical thermometer and some delicate, sharp instruments, regarding them curiously. He had carried them for two years, in his saddle pack. Two years. . . .

He turned to the groaning, muttering patient.

It was night. Red had seen all the patients. Several of the women had turned to with the sponging. None of the afflicted, he found, were beyond the danger stage. The dreaded perforation and hemorrhage had not set in as yet in any case, although Tom McBride was near it, he thought.

He went back to the McBride house and knocked. The old woman let him in and in the back room he found Mrs. McBride and Mary Cavan, sitting on either side of the bed. The girl arose and said:

"The fever has gone down. I went to the Parleys' and helped, then came back."

McBride seemed indeed to be sleeping. Red said, "I have no drugs, you know. But constant care and the sponging is about all we can do. I suppose you know that."

She led him through the door into the sitting room. She said, "The Bishop and Moroni Tanner have admitted to grudging confidence in you. The patients will respond to having a doctor about. That is half the battle."

Red said, "You are very clever."

She smiled briefly, then was all business again. "I have bad news for you."

"Bad news? Someone's fever worse?"

She shook her head. "One of your party came into town. Father took her to our house quickly, but she was seen by some of our people."

"Prudence!" groaned Red. "She probably thought she could help."

"And now a tall man is poking about, trying to find her," said the girl. "Any moment there will be trouble."

"That would be Sam Tabor."

"A handsome man," the girl said gravely. "Very tall."

Red said, "Thank you, Mary. Watch Tom McBride. If his fever heightens again, use more cold sponging."

He opened the door and went into the street. It was late, and save for a few scattered lamps in windows of the sick, only the moon threw a white light over the village. He started toward Seth Cavan's house around the corner.

AS he approached Zion Street, the main thoroughfare of Soladi, he saw the tall man. Sam Tabor was peering into one of the lighted windows. The yellow lamplight showed that the big foreman was wearing both his guns.

Red called, "Sam! Come here!"

The big man wheeled, a bit unsteadily, and Red knew that a bottle had been broached in the Hatt camp. A door opened down the street, then another. Other lights came on at the bull-like reply of Sam Tabor:

"Who the hell are you? Another damn Mormon? Where is the girl? Dammit, you'll never steal her, you dirty, lecherous . . ."

Red ran forward, conscious suddenly that Sam would not recognize him without the beard, in the Mormon clothes. He called:

"It's me! Red, you fool!"

"I'll blast every damn, dirty Mormon in town," roared Sam. He drew both guns, cocked them.

Red was within two steps of him, now. He reached out, put a hand on the taller man's chest. He said rapidly, in a low, hard voice:

"Put up those six-guns, Sam! Put them up! There's a hundred men in town would shoot you quick as look at you!"

"I'll murder every last . . ."

"Shut up!"

"They got Prudence, I tell you! They got her hidden!"

Red heard light footsteps going by them, caught a glimpse of the long, gray skirt of Mary Cavan. Sam's attention was distracted as Mary's voice, cool as the evening air, said:

"I'll fetch her, Red!"

Red acted purely upon impulse. His left fist described a short, bludgeon-like swing. His right hand grasped Sam's left wrist.

The punch landed on Sam's chin. With his right hand, Red jerked the big man

to him. Sam slumped, but one of his guns went off.

In an instant, the doors were flung wide. Lights appeared, and men were crowding in the street. They came like magic—bearded, stern men, some in their night shirts, others half-clad, all armed with shotguns or rifles or six-shooters. They crowded around Sam and Red, and Moroni Tanner's quavering accents came:

"Kill the gentiles! They bring nothing but trouble to Believers!"

Bishop Cowderey, his trousers held by one gallus, his right hand grasping an old fowling-piece, said in stentorian accents, "Quiet! What caused this row? Who is that?"

Red held Sam erect, snatching the guns, replacing them in the worn holsters. Lanterns were being brought. He propped Sam against the wall and held him there. The big man's head lolled on his chest. He was almost completely unconscious from the blow on the jaw.

The lantern light fell full upon them. Red leaned close, pretending to examine Sam's eyes, prying his mouth open. Sam gurgled. Red whispered viciously:

"Stick out your tongue, damn you! Stick it out!"

From the background, other voices faded in. The ring of stern men stood fast, and Tanner kept saying, "Gentile spies! They're everywhere. They're hounding us from our homes again. President Taylor says . . ."

The other voices came stronger. Seth Cavan said, "Here is a poor girl who seeks her friends. Stand aside! Why have you got those guns, Saints? Can you not see it is Red, the doctor, and a sick man?"

Then Mary was through, holding Pru by the arm, and some of the closest of the threatening crew stood back. Red snapped:

"Mary! This man is running a temperature. I must get him back to our camp!"

Prudence came and stood near to Red, shivering a little. She had changed to a gingham dress, Red saw out of the corner of his eye. It was amazing how much smaller she seemed, and how her hair was done up, instead of flowing about her shoulders, and how blue and humble her eyes were, staring at him, then at Sam. She faltered. "I wanted to help with the nursing. Has Sam got the fever? What will we do, Red?"

"Is this worse than the Apaches?" Red said, in a low voice. "Keep your nerve. We've got to get this fool out of here."

MORONI TANNER was repeating, "They're after us. I heard one of them cursing all Mormons. Threatening to kill us! He fired at someone. We ought to lynch them!"

The Bishop still blustered. Seth Cavan said calmly, "I tell you that is the doctor and a sick man. Here is Mary now, with their horses."

The tall girl led three horses—Red's Pru's and Sam's. How she had gathered them all so quickly, Red could not imagine. She pushed through the crowd and people had to step aside to keep from being trampled. Red whispered to her:

"I'll be back tomorrow. Let me get this pair out of here!"

Without a word, Mary helped lift the husky, still semi-sleeping form of Sam Tabor into his saddle. Pru mounted and held the big foreman on one side, Red performed the same service from the other. Before they started, Red turned and surveyed the men who glared at him. Picking out Moroni Tanner in the flickering light, he said calmly:

"If anyone follows me, or makes any attempt to injure my patient—every sick man and woman in Soladi shall pay—and a few well ones, too!"

He held the fanatical elder with his glance for a moment. He glanced around at the others, nodded, and without further words gave the signal to move. The Mormons stood silent, watching them go, until the Bishop said crossly:

"Get back to your homes! Tend the sick! I will see to this tomorrow! Get home, all of you!"

Not until then did Red breathe evenly. Pru said nothing, and soon Sam began to mutter, to complain of his jaw. Red shook him awake, sat him up straight. The foreman blinked, reached for his guns.

Red said coldly, "I have you covered, Sam."

The foreman opened his mouth to bel-

low. Pru's voice cut in sharply, "You've upset everything, Sam!"

The big man closed his mouth, stared at Pru. He stammered, "I thought they had you . . . I thought . . ."

"You hit that bottle," said Red. He was furious. "You got half drunk and played the fool!"

"Those Mormons!" said Sam thickly. "They steal any gentile woman they can get their hands on. . . ."

Pru said wearily, "He is an awful fool, Red. Has he put us in great danger?"

Sam stared from one to the other of them, shaking his head as though to throw off a veil. Red said:

"He cursed them. He fired off his revolver. Moroni Tanner is a fanatic—and there are others who hate gentiles. I don't know how great the danger is—yet."

Prudence shivered. "They came out so silently, all with weapons. That girl—Mary—was so strange, staring at me, bringing me out. If she hadn't mentioned your name—Red—I'd have thought she meant me harm. And then—you! Your beard. Those different clothes!"

Sam Tabor said, "I remember now! It was you!"

"It was not your brother," snapped Red. "I had to clip your jaw again! If you want a third dose, you shall have that, my besotted friend."

Sam was staring in the moonlight. "That scar!" he said.

"If you do not learn to keep your mouth shut and mind your own business," said Red, "I'm going to hog-tie you every time I leave camp."

Sam Tabor said, "You're—you're—"

"Will you shut up?" Red said. His voice was harsh as the rasp of a file. Sam Tabor shut up.

They rode the rest of the way to camp in silence. Holmes and Regan had evidently finished the bottle. They were snoring on either side of a dead fire.

Red said, "And you can stand watch the rest of the night!"

Sam said, "I—er—I admit I was drinkin' a little."

He seemed thoroughly chastened. Pru looked at him strangely, started to speak, kept silence.

Red's voice changed. He said simply, "All right. It was a long drive. You were worried about Pru. Forget it. Take this watch tonight—I need rest. It's all over and no use to worry."

He nodded once to Pru, turned on his heel. He walked away from them, found his bed roll and spread his tarp. He watered the roan, rubbed him with some straw. He carefully folded the black coat, lay down, and went promptly to sleep.

Prudence watched him, standing beside Sam. The foreman did not offer any further words of explanation. He too was watching Red Mathew.

Prudence climbed slowly into her wagon. Tabor sat down, after a moment, poking at the black embers of the fire. Silence fell over the wagons and the little herd of Texas cattle which had come so many miles in so many months.

IV

WAKING at dawn was a matter of habit with Red Mathew. This morning, however, he was conscious of watching eyes. He rolled over, shook himself, looked up at Sam Tabor.

The foreman said quickly, "I didn't mean to wake you. The sun's just gettin' up. But look over yonder."

Towards the gap in the hills there was a moment's glimpse of it, then it was gone—a column of smoke, black against the violet-pink of the morning. Sam said:

"I thought I saw a fire last night. What you reckon it means?"

Red rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Just what you think."

Tabor nodded soberly. "Reckon my fool play last night did it, huh?"

Red started for the water barrel. "Maybe so. Maybe not. Maybe Pixley came back."

Sam stood close, watching Red's morning ablutions. "Was that the skunk with the Apaches? That was Joel Pixley?"

Red nodded, spluttering. Sam looked over his shoulder to make sure none of the others were awake. He said:

"Eli nor the boys don't know anything about Pixley, Red. I wouldn't either—exceptin' I heard plenty about him, back in Arizona."

Red dried himself and said sharply, "You're mighty friendly this morning, Sam. How come?"

The big man moved his feet distressedly. "Wa'al, you see—I know who you are, Red. That scar . . ."

"I warned you last night about that!" said Red frostily.

"Okay! Okay!" said Sam hastily. "Only—I want you to know I'll stick and take orders from now on."

Red nodded. "Thanks. I'm afraid we'll need a lot of cooperation before we're through."

Sam said, "I b'lieve you. . . . Hey! Look! That girl!"

A mule was coming, loose-gaited, swift, up from the village toward the plain. Upon its back was the unmistakable figure of Mary Cavan. Red ran forward to meet her, instantly alert.

She swung down, holding the mule's bridle, panting a little. She said, "Red! I've got to see you alone!"

Red said, "Sam's all right—now. What is it?"

"A night rider came in," she gasped. "From the north. Joel Pixley has reorganized the old Danites. He is going to ride against the gentiles. The word came that none are to go through in peace. Moroni Taylor and some others are stirring up the village. . . ."

"What about the patients? The fever?" demanded Red.

"They say they can cure their own, that the Bishop can perform a miracle if he prays hard enough. Father is doing all he can to talk them down, but—it looks bad."

Red said, "Are we cut off at the pass to the north?"

"Yes," she said. "The Saints are riding in from the entire district to block the Skillet. You have no chance but to parley with them."

"Argue with Danites?" demanded Sam Tabor. "I've been hearin' tales of those skulkers since I was knee high. My father came from Missouri. . . ."

The girl flashed, "The Mormons, too, were persecuted in Missouri, sir!"

Red interposed, "Here, now! Mary came to help us. What can you suggest, my dear?"

"Nothing," she said hopelessly. "I am a Mormon, but it doesn't seem right to turn on you, after you helped us. My father is doing all he can—they have been up almost all night. The messenger left, and Soladi is divided. My father says he passed his word that you are to go through, but men like Moroni Tanner . . ." There was utter contempt in her voice.

Red studied her. He said, "We could go back through the Skillet and take the long trail through Colorado. At least, the rest of our party could. I'm staying."

"Why?" she asked. "Why are you staying?"

"For reasons of my own," said Red. He faced the rising sun and all the professional mannerisms, all the surface kindliness which had come upon him since he had shaved off his beard and returned to nursing the sick was gone. His hawk nose jutted, his hard jaw was rigid with roped muscle as he stared toward the place where the column of smoke had shown.

"YOUR patients?" asked Mary Cavan. She plucked at his sleeve, imploring him. She was very beautiful, almost as tall as Red. "You'll take care of my people?"

"I'll do what I can," he said. "But they will have to take their chances."

"You can't go to Soladi," said Sam Tabor. "If the Danites are ridin' again, they'll kill every gentile they get hands on."

"Yes," said Red. "I know that."

The Mormon girl said, "Father is against them. There are others—we can stop them. . . ."

"Nothin' can stop Joel Pixley!" insisted Sam. "We got to get Eli and Pru out of here, Red!"

The camp was coming alive. Chin Lee made noises with pots and pans. Prudence came from the wagon, running to them. She said:

"Father has it! Father has the fever!"

She stopped, staring at Mary Cavan, who stood close to Red, still holding his sleeve. She said:

"What is it? Is there trouble?"

"Later," said Red quickly. "Let me see Eli at once."

He ran to the wagon. Eli Hatt lay stretched on a blanket and the flush of his gaunt face was enough to tell the story. Red said:

"It'll be a couple of weeks, Eli. But you can make it if you fight."

Eli nodded, already wandering a bit in his mind. "For Pru," he muttered. "Got to get her through—to home."

Red descended from the wagon and went slowly toward the two girls and Sam Tabor. Regan and Holmes were up and tending the horses. Red called them together. He said:

"We're here for some time. Eli is sick. There are certain things. . . ."

He looked at Pru. Her hair was very lovely. She did not flinch when he told her the truth, that Pixley was on the rampage, that they were in grave danger.

He said, "We shall have to stand guard constantly. Mary Cavan and her father will help us secretly, if they can. I will go down and see the Bishop now. Sam, you're in charge of the camp. Pru, you must stay here."

Regan brought him the roan. Without pausing for breakfast he mounted and rode beside Mary Cavan toward the village. Once he turned back. Prudence and Sam were staring after him. He shook himself, hardening his purpose within him. He had both Colt's strapped to his belt, now. There was a derringer in the pocket of the black coat he had borrowed from Seth Cavan, and in its scabbard the big Sharps was loaded and ready.

Mary Cavan said timidly, "I hope you will be judicious with the Bishop."

Red glanced at her. She was very pale. He said in his hard, bitter voice, "Good Mormons like you and your father cannot sway him with calm words."

She said no more. They rode into Soladi, and the streets were quiet after the night's excitement. Mary said:

"That is the house of the Bishop."

For a moment Red relaxed. He said, "Mary, please go home and sleep. I will tend the sick before I leave—whatever happens."

She bowed her head and rode the mule into her father's yard. Red caught a glimpse of careworn, red-eyed Seth as he ran to meet her, of the girl's frowning, buxom mother in the doorway. There was trouble ahead for good Mormons, he thought.

The Bishop's house was the biggest in town. There was an ell which led off toward the rear, almost a separate building. The Bishop, Red reflected grimly, had not Seth Cavan's scruples about plural marriages. He wondered how many wives Cowderey had sealed to him. He reflected with bitter humor that protesting gentiles would do well to stop and consider the doubtful benefits of polygamy before they maligned the Mormons. He tried to imagine being married to several women, of the conflict and squabbling and attempting to keep them all happy!

He tried to imagine being married to one woman—and hastily put the thought from his mind, hammering boldly upon the front door of the Bishop's stately residence.

COWDEREY and Moroni Tanner sat upright upon straight chairs, their beards bristling. The Bishop said:

"We will not be coerced by you, Mathew!"

Moroni Tanner squeaked, "Our people will live longer without your care!"

Red sneered at them, his face wolfish in its intensity. He said, "There are Mormons in this town who do not believe that."

"They will go down into Hell fire!" squawked Tanner. "Unbelievers will rot forever in Hell!"

But the Bishop was a politician, and it was at him that Red directed his threat. "You will keep Pixley and his men away from us. You will give me a chance to doctor Eli Hatt. If you fail—not a moment's time for your sick. Furthermore . . ."

He arose and faced them, his body crouched a little, like a large beast ready to spring. The black coat fell away from the two polished revolvers. His agate eyes shot sparks. He roared:

"Furthermore, I hereby guarantee you that if any of my party is in any way injured I will personally come down here and deal justice to you, Bishop Cowderey!"

The knicknacks on the whatnot jangled with the force of his tremendous voice.

Tanner leaped almost out of his skin, his pop-eyes staring at the two menacing guns. Cowderey gulped and stammered.

"It is without my province—I mean, I can't stop them night riders, Mathew! They don't take no orders from me."

"You'll do as I say!"

The Bishop said, "We-ell. I'll do what I can, Mathew. We appreciate the help you've given us. I reckon . . . Brother Moroni, ain't that breakfast cooking? Go tell them I want three eggs this morning."

The thin Tanner was out of the room like a weasel, glad to escape. Cowderey leaned forward and said in a hoarse whisper:

"I'll do everything in the world, Mathew. I promise. I'll back Seth Cavan and the others. But you're in danger. I can't stop Pixley."

"You control your townspeople," said Red, straightening. "I'll do the rest."

He left at once, while the advantage was his. He strode down to the humble abode of Tom McBride and found the man sitting up, eating breakfast. He stared, unbelieving.

McBride, a mouse of a man, peered gratefully at him. He said, "Praise Joseph! Doctor Mathew, you have saved my life! I am a well man!"

The temperature was down, all right. The swelling had reduced. Red said:

"You stay in that bed, sir! And don't try to move too much."

They crowded around him, the old woman, the wife of Tom, and two men, who proved to be Ephraim and Esau, his sons. They said little, but they forced breakfast upon Red and their eyes were like those of hound dogs, unable to express their gratitude but telling their story of humble eagerness to repay.

Red ate and gave instructions in a gruff voice. As soon as he could he departed from the adoring quartet. The back of his neck was quite warm—he was actually embarrassed by their admiration. He suppressed a warm feeling in his heart and stamped into the next house.

He found half of the sick people better, the other half worse. One, indeed, an ancient crone, he thought near death. He was doing little good, he pondered, yet their faces lighted up when they saw him, their pulses rallied. The age-old feeling of trust in the physician was upon his side.

Mary Cavan appeared at noon and together they rehearsed the progress they were making. Red said:

"How many men are with your father?"

"Not enough," she said sadly.

"The Bishop? What of him?"

"He is praying," she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps he will be granted a revelation."

Red shook his head. The Cavans were enlightened, but even they believed in divine revelation. It seemed hopeless. He mounted the roan and rode back to camp to attend Eli Hatt. He carried ice in a saddle bag, provided by Mary.

PRU'S face was pale, her eyes were red. She said, "He is completely delirious. I thought you would never come."

Red went into the wagon. Eli was bad, all right. He sponged him for an hour to reduce the fever. Then he turned the task over to Pru and came out into the sun for a breathing spell. He was, he realized, tired—not physically but mentally. He had been too long from the profession he had never really had time to practice.

Sam rode in from the herd. He said, "There are men watching us. I see them in the hills every now and then."

Red said, "I'm going to sleep. Tonight I'll watch. Have the others catch naps if they can."

"You think Pixley'll come down?"

"What do you know about Joel Pixley?" countered Red.

"He's the Mormon stirs up the Apaches against us," said Sam promptly. "He had somethin' to do with the Great Meadows Massacre. Some say he put the Indians up to that. Some say he was in it. He was one of Brigham Young's trouble shooters. They say he's cut the throats of a hundred men. And women."

Red nodded. "He'll be down."

"They say he's got twenty wives," said Sam.

"And nine lives, like a cat," added Red.

"I'd like to take one," said Sam. "Just one, with this." He tapped the butt of his .44.

Red went to sleep under a wagon.

When he awoke it was dusk, and meat was cooking. He ate heartily, looked in upon Eli Hatt. The fever was better, but the telltale swelling had set in. Pru was exhausted. Red said:

"You've got to sleep. I'll watch him a while."

She looked at him with tired eyes. "You are kind, when you want to be, Red. How is it in the village?"

"Bad," said Red bluntly. "Will you sleep?"

She lay down in the front of the wagon, on the boxes. Red moved to a spot where he could see the surrounding countryside and still hear the labored breathing of his patient. Out in the darkness were Sam Tabor and the two cowhands, at the far edge of the camp Chin Lee was concealed, his cleaver clutched in his yellow, claw-like hands. The camp seemed to sleep, but no man closed his eyes save poor Eli Hatt.

It was close to midnight when Pru awoke. Red warned her to keep quiet, turned over his vigil to her. She whispered:

"Where are you going?"

He shook his head. She reached out in the dark and seized his hand.

"Please come back. I'm frightened, Red. You're the only one can save us."

He jerked away as though her hand was a hot iron. He plunged from the wagon and found the roan horse. He saddled silently and made sure of his guns. He rode off, making a circle, ranging northward toward the pass in the hills.

He avoided the spots where Sam and the others would be watching. He wanted to be alone on this scout. He did not want to think about Prudence Hatt. There were other things—more important, he told himself vigorously. He rode through a copse of woods, stopped at the edge. Dismounting, he crawled a way on foot, using every bit of woodsmanship he possessed.

If his calculations were correct, he was close to the spot where he had seen the smoke this morning. He drew one of the Colt's and crept behind a large oak tree. Pausing for a moment, he held his breath and listened. To his utter amazement, voices came clearly to him.

He removed his hat and cautiously peeked around the trunk of the tree. He was on the edge of a glade, he dimly perceived. A horse whinnied, and he froze in fear that General would answer. The voices rose again. Red moved to another sheltering tree, then another. He saw a horse's ears against the deep blue skyline of the starry night. He shrugged his way into a willow clump and listened with all his might.

A man said harshly, "You are fools! All of you!"

The reply was gentle, "We think not, Brother Pixley. Doctor Mathew has been good to our people. We demand his safekeeping."

It was Seth Cavan! In another instant, Red's hackles were rising. The next voice was that of Mary Cavan!

SHE said, "We came alone and unarmed to plead with you, Brother Pixley. President Taylor would not want these innocent people harmed. They want only to get through the Wyoming. They mean no harm to us."

"They are gentiles!" proclaimed Pixley's hoarse accents. "Their cattle carry disease. They rob and rape and plunder wherever they go."

"Not these people!" declared Seth Cavan.

"Doctor Mathew has already saved Tom McBride," Mary said.

"And what of the big cowboy who came drunk into town?" demanded Pixley. "Remember, Mary Cavan, you are to be sealed to me. I have word that you spoke in favor of the gentile."

"That is another thing." The girl's voice rang out bravely. Red shivered and drew his other gun without conscious volition. "That was a matter between you and the Bishop. I have never consented to marry you, Brother Pixley!"

"Consented? I should beg you?" Pixley laughed deep in his throat. "Do you know my position, Sister Mary Cavan? Do I need to ask if women will marry me?"

"Yes," said Seth Cavan steadily. "You do, Brother Pixley. My daughter refuses flatly!"

There was a stirring of men. Red wondered how many were with Pixley.

He could feel them moving in, surrounding the girl and her father, although he could not see plainly.

Pixley's voice was thick with anger. "I cannot countenance such an attitude. You cannot defy me, I assure you. It is my wish that you remain here until I have disposed of these gentiles. The Bishop will then join us, Mary Cavan!"

"I have patients in Soladi," said Mary. "I will return to them now, at once."

"Seize them, men!" commanded Pixley. "They stay here!"

There was slight commotion, a cry from the girl. Seth Cavan gritted out, "Don't touch me, Brothers!"

Red came out of the willow clump. He came bent low, his guns ready. He came across the clearing, moving swiftly, and he was among them before they knew he was within two miles.

He tried to pick out Pixley, but the starlight did not penetrate the trees with enough light. He landed upon the nearest of the small knot of men who struggled with Seth Cavan. He applied the barrel of a Colt's to the man's skull.

He was swinging lustily, then, knocking them down like ten pins, holding his fire for fear of injuring the Cavans. It was a moment or two before they were aware that he was an enemy, so close were they packed. Then Pixley's voice sounded like a trumpet:

"It's the gentile! Kill him!"

Red laid a last Mormon away with the bloodied gun barrel. Seth Cavan was free. Mary, strong and straight, threw a small man from her and leaped to her father's side. Red's guns trained upon the remainder of the crew. There were not more than seven or eight standing.

Red's accents were like chilled steel. "Just hold still, all of you. One tiny move and I'll blast you to Hell!"

Under his breath he said rapidly, "The horses! Get them!"

Mary slipped away. Joel Pixley howled from somewhere in the darkness, "Stand aside! I've got him."

Red dropped to the ground, pulling Seth Cavan with him. His revolver spat at the sound of the voice. The Mormons, terrified, split and ran. Red dropped one of them with a snap shot, raked the bushes beyond, seeking to locate Pixley. A gun boomed and lead whistled near Red's head.

Seth Cavan was squirming, trying to retreat, saying, "They are too many. Here is Mary with the horses."

Again the gun sounded. Mary was coming fast, riding the mule, leading a cayuse. Red emptied his right-hand pistol, shifted the other, fired his five shots at spaced, regular intervals, sending the enemy to cover.

He arose then, holstering the useless revolver, taking the derringer from his pocket. He boosted Seth Cavan with one hand, placed him in the saddle. The gun fired once more and Seth cried, "I'm shot!"

"Get going!" roared Red. He slapped the cayuse, dreading that a bullet would cut down the girl. He plunged sideways into the trees and opened fire with the little derringer. The horse and the mule departed with celerity, Seth Cavan clinging to the pommel, the girl riding by his side, urging on both steeds. Red dived behind a tree and reloaded one Colt's.

PIXLEY was not close at hand. He was on the other side of the glade, shouting orders for his men to come in and capture Red. The Mormons were crashing in the bushes, changing position rapidly to make poor targets. Red gave them a couple more, slid behind the large oak. He hesitated there, pushing bullets into his guns.

It would be a good spot to make a fight. They outnumbered him, but they had each other to look out for—he had only himself. He welcomed the odds, the sheltering darkness. He could stalk them one by one. He could, with any luck at all, find Joel Pixley and put lead in the carcass of that gentleman.

He remained very quiet, and soon the Mormons were also still, and he knew they were spread out, awaiting his attack. It was a great temptation. He had come miles for such an engagement. He had waited years for such an opportunity.

Then he remembered Eli Hatt, sick in the wagon. He remembered Mary and Seth Cavan, who would now be in danger from their fellow-Mormons, who in case he failed to get Pixley would certainly suffer blood atonement for tonight's work.

He remembered Prudence's words, "You're the only one who can save us!"

He retreated. He moved laterally, without sound, among the trees. He stopped often to listen for pursuit, but none came. He made the edge of the woods, and there was the faithful roan, nibbling grass in peace. He mounted and rode like the wind for the Hatt encampment.

It was morning. Red said, "They will attack, treacherously if possible. It is only a matter of time."

Sam Tabor said, "You probably stopped 'em last night. You and the Cavans."

Prudence said softly, "She's very brave. When they rode in last night, she was holding her father in the saddle. I've got her in my bed, alongside Seth. She refuses to leave him."

Red shook his head. "We can't leave here now. We cannot desert the Cavans, and they dare not go into town. Without them we have no way of knowing what goes on in Soladi. If Pixley attacks, he will have us outnumbered plenty. And Mormons can fight—I was lucky in taking them by surprise last night."

Prudence said hopefully, "Father seems better today."

"Luckily, he is better," said Red. "The only thing we can do is wait."

"We'll watch all day," said Sam. "Regan and Holmes will stick and fight. Let Pixley come!"

They watched that day. Seth Cavan recovered somewhat from the shock of being hit in the shoulder with a large hunk of lead and was able to get around. Mary Cavan sat and talked with Prudence for hours, Red could not imagine about what. The day dwindled into dusk and Eli Hatt's fever rose again as the sun went down.

It was dark when the sound of hoofs from the east, over the route the wagons had followed out of the Skillet, brought a challenge from Regan who was guarding that outpost.

A weak voice called stubbornly, "I come to see the Doc."

Regan brought them in to the carefully sheltered lamp inside Prudence's wagon where Red and the girl and Sam had just repaired for a conference. There were two youths and between them they supported a small, elderly man who said staunchly:

"You can put down yer gun! The Doc knows me well enough!"

"TOM McBRIDE," said Red sternly. "I told you to stay in bed."

Ephraim and Esau said almost in unison, "You can't talk to him, Doc, he's stubborn."

"Talk to me?" said McBride. "With Pixley and his murderers a-ridin' into Soladi and plottin' to kill the Doc and his friends? And Mother Cavan a prisoner at the Bishop's house, and our own women threatened for speakin' their minds? Talk to me, is it? Did I come from Illinois for this, sufferin' every step of the way, that my own people should turn on my doctor?"

He gasped for breath and the two boys eased him to a blanket on the floor of the wagon. Red said:

"Pixley is in town?"

Tom McBride said, "Joseph protect us, he is. And eight men. Some wounded, too." He grinned shrewdly at Red. "They're plannin' to raid you tonight, Doc. Eph and Esau and me got guns—back there with the hosses. Your man wouldn't let us bring 'em in."

Seth Cavan came close to the tailboard and peered in. He said, "Is that you, Tom? You say Ma is prisoner?"

Mary Cavan was close behind. Tom McBride said to them, "It's time some of us were showing that crooked Bishop! It's time the decent folk were making their peace with the gentiles! The Doc, here, he asked for nothing but a way through the territory, and he helped us. And now Pixley is ready to kill again."

He was growing very excited and the fever mounted to his cheeks. Red said, "Be quiet, Tom. I had you out of it—you don't want to go back into typhoid again."

Tom McBride rested his back against the side of the wagon body. His voice became a low chant, so that they had to lean close to listen. He said:

"I'm gettin' old in the service of the Faith. I came with Brigham, who was rough, but strong. Brigham never liked the plural marriages. You know that, Seth Cavan!"

"Nor I!" muttered Cavan leaning for-

ward so as not to miss a word. "Go on, Tom."

"I'm a simple man, unedjicated," whispered McBride. "But there are things I know. We give our tithe to the church, eh? Yes, we do—but the Bishop counts it out. There are things in the past. . . ."

"About Pixley," urged Seth Cavan. "Have no fear, Tom. Tell us what you know. You were at Great Meadows, weren't you?"

Red drew in his breath, moved outside the tight circle of listeners, holding himself motionless. McBride said:

"I was there. Not many of us left, eh? Twenty-two years ago. The devils —Pixley and Isaac Haight and John Lee —set the Indians on them first. . . ."

"Who were the people?" Cavan insisted, as though he were anxious for every detail, as though he had never heard the story.

"An emigrant train under a Captain Fancher," recited McBride. "One hundred and twenty men, women, and little children. Gentiles. 'Twas said they boasted of having killed Joseph Smith back in Illinois, but no one believed that. It was the time of the Fed'ral invasion of Utah. Lee and Haight and Pixley set the Injuns on them, then promised to deliver the gentiles."

"Fancher handed over their guns," Cavan prompted.

"The militia—all Mormons—lined up. The people from the train walked through —to safety, they thought," said McBride. "I can see them yet! Innocent women and children!"

He covered his face with his hands. After a moment he said, "Not a one escaped! Just the little ones who couldn't remember, ever, what had been done to them!"

RED came back toward them. His voice had deepened, his lean face was like a hatchet, thrusting at Tom McBride.

"You are wrong, my friend. One escaped. An eighteen-year-old boy got away. An Indian tomahawked him, but he fell into a bush—and when they came to look for him, they missed him."

He turned the scar upon his face into the light so that all could see. Tom McBride wailed:

"I never fired my gun, Doc! I was there, I admit it. To this day I've doubts in the Faith because I was there. But I never shot!"

"Lee and Haight," insisted Red. "Where are they today?"

"Dead!" said Seth Cavan. "Miserably gone and buried. Only Pixley lives of that crew."

"And Pixley has added to his crimes," cried Tom McBride. "We are tryin' to live, here in our little town, and Pixley comes to urge us to kill our benefactors. I will not have it, I tell you! My boys and I will fight!"

Red leaned forward, pressing the old man down. He said, "Lie still and behave. Prudence and Mary will put you in with Eli Hatt. You need not fight. You are ill."

The old man did not struggle. He looked up at Red and said simply, "I will do what you say, Doc, because I got confidence in you. The Bishop couldn't lick the fever, but you did. Nobody's been kind to me exceptin' only you."

Red climbed slowly down from the wagon. The two McBride boys followed solemnly. Sam Tabor's hand kept creeping to his six-gun as he shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

Seth Cavan said, "The girls can watch the camp and the sick men. I am able to go."

"You can't go down there!" said Mary. "A town full of enemies!"

Red turned suddenly upon the McBride boys. He said, "You came from the east? Is the road clear to the Skillet?"

"Yes, sir. We come around so's not to be seen."

"Sam!" snapped Red. "Take Regan and Holmes, and hitch up! Work as quickly and quietly as possible. Get the wagons through, back the way we came. Head for Colorado. If you get clear and all goes well, perhaps you can return for the cattle. . . ."

"Leave the cattle?" cried Prudence.

"And save your lives," said Red. "Pixley is a murderer. We saw him with the Apaches and he knows it. He must kill us now to save his hide. We can only hope that your father and Tom McBride can stand the trip. Get to the first high ground you can defend—there's plenty in

the gorges as you know. Stay there until one of us gets through."

"One of who?" demanded Sam Tabor. "You can't . . ."

"This is a matter for Seth Cavan and the McBrides and the survivor of the Great Meadows Massacre," said Red. "I lost my mother and father in that place, Sam."

"I'm goin' with you," snorted Tabor. "I'll throw lead into them skulkers. . . ."

"You're getting Prudence and Mary and the sick men to safety," said Red. "That's an order, Sam!"

The big man stepped back, started to salute, looked foolish. He mumbled, "Yes, sir!"

Red turned to Seth Cavan. "I reckon you have a reason for going in. Your wife is captive. The McBride boys seem anxious to have a crack at Pixley. If you will arm yourself, we will start."

Prudence Hatt was there when Red caught up the roan horse, waiting for him. She said, "I know you are right again. But you—please come back!"

Red said, "Twenty-two years. "I'm forty, Pru. I was eighteen when I escaped that massacre. I was frightened. A Texan raised me, struck it rich in gold, sent me to school. I went to Europe, studied medicine. When I returned I was in the war, Pru."

"Don't try to tell it all now," she said. "It—it sounds as if you don't expect to come back."

"Then my foster father was killed while prospecting in Utah," said Red steadily. "By Indians, they said. But I heard different. I heard he ran afoul of Pixley and tried to collect for me. That sounds like Colonel Ramsey, doesn't it?"

"Colonel Ramsey was your foster father?" she cried. "Then you were—are—Redfern Ramsey!"

"Redfern Mathew Ramsey," he bowed. "Late Captain of Texas Cavalry. Late gambler and drunkard and bad man of the Southwest. Killer of four men, including the Mexican. Too drunk and too mean to track down the Colonel's murderer. Too scared—because he could remember the Great Meadows Massacre with a memory so vivid that it kept him awake of nights!"

She shrank away in the darkness, or so he imagined. He mounted the horse. The two McBrides and Seth Cavan, stern-faced in the dim moonlight, were at hand. Red leaned down and whispered:

"Sam Tabor is all man. Don't fret. I knew him in the Army, when he was a boy. He'll see you through—"

He clapped spurs to the amazed General and followed the mutinous Mormons down the back trail to Soladi.

V

THE McBrides jogged ahead, their ponies knowing the way in the dark. Seth Cavan dropped back until they were out of earshot, restraining Red with a touch of his one good hand. Then the Mormon said:

"Doctor, I must tell you something. I did not witness the Great Meadows Massacre, but I came by as it was over. I was bringing word from Brigham Young that the caravan was to go free."

"Yes?" said Red.

"One of the little gentile tots was a dark-haired baby girl, about six months old," said Cavan in a low voice. "I took her away from Isaac Haight."

"Mary?" asked Red.

"Yes. She is a gentile, by birth. She should have a chance to go back and live among her own people. If I do not come out of this, will you see to it?"

"I would like to oblige you," said Red, "but something tells me that neither of us will come out of this. Do you think Pixley will be at the Bishop's house?"

Cavan said:

"I should imagine so. But if you *do* get out, Red, you'll see to it?"

"Yes," nodded Red. "I'll see to it. Let's ride faster!"

It was growing in him, the desire for vengeance. In the beginning, while he had been drunk more often than sober, after the Colonel's death, it had been like a nightmare from which he would wake up sweating and screaming. The ever-present memory of his mother's and father's execution had blistered his resolve, and he had used whiskey in a futile attempt to kill all feeling.

Then he had out-drawn and out-steadied that Mormon in Arizona. That had begun his come-back . . . strange that a brawl in

a grog shop should give him back his courage!

He was enough of a doctor to recognize strange cures as events to accept, not to look into. With the killing of a thieving, stray Mormon he had started on the road to a sort of rehabilitation. A strange sort, no doubt, but upon the right path. It had taken Prudence Hatt and the typhoid epidemic in Soladi really to hold him in the road.

It had taken responsibility which he was willing to accept to set him really straight. He admitted it, riding with Seth Cavan behind the McBride boys, his two Colt's loaded and his Sharps in the boot at his knee. The longing of old Eli Hatt for a home in Wyoming, the stubborn, silent fight of Regan and Holmes and Tabor to see the wagons and cattle through, the shining blond hair of the girl in the mornings. . . .

It had all contributed to making him the man he thought he should be. And now he was riding through the dark to confront Pixley at last, and there were armed Mormons, dozens of them, between Red and his quarry, and there were sick Mormons without a doctor's aid in the houses of the town, and back on the plain Sam Tabor was preparing to flee and leave the cattle behind after all the hard, bone labor—and none of it made sense. He admitted that, too.

For all that he had worked to save seemed lost, excepting only the revenge. Yet he dared not stop, he must go on. If sick Mormons died, if Eli Hatt's precious stock was lost, if Prudence must fly to escape—he still must visit justice upon Joel Pixley. That was the law of the frontier, and he had been overlong in executing it, he knew.

The McBride boys paused and the four men drew close together.

"We are on the east side of town. Yonder is the Bishop's house," whispered Ephraim.

"They'll have a watch out," said Esau. "But we know about where the guards will be posted."

Red drew himself up straight in the saddle. All the old habits of the War were coming back to him. He snapped:

"Dismount! We will take care of the guards first."

The McBrides helped the wounded Seth Cavan to the ground. Ephraim said:

"I'll lead, sir."

They went single file between the houses. The Bishop's fine, large residence was surrounded with gardens, trees planted in rows. It was easy to keep in the shadows. A man moved ahead of Ephraim, who stopped dead.

Red shouldered the McBride boy aside. Ducking low, he edged forward until he could see the sentinel. The man had a rifle on his shoulder and was leaning against a tree, evidently half asleep. Red trod on a dry branch and the man came to life, bringing his rifle around, peering. Red stepped close to him and commanded sternly:

"Quiet!"

THE man almost saluted at the peremptory demand. Red slugged him on the chin with the muzzle of his Colt's, caught him as he fell. The McBrides hastened up and, with great celerity, applied a gag of dirty cloth and bonds made of the man's own belt and their own.

Seth Cavan held a short-barreled gun in his good hand and whispered, "There must be others."

Ephraim McBride nodded silently and pointed. Near the house a man walked up and down, carrying a shotgun. Red said, "Watch on all sides," and was off again. He was beginning to enjoy this. He had not felt so close to freedom of movement and expression in years. He was approaching the end of a long journey.

He was on top of the guard before the man heard him. He hooked an arm around the man's neck and applied a strangle hold, taking no chances on an outcry so near to the house. After a moment he knew there would be no necessity of binding this outpost. The man died easily in the terrible grip.

There was a window at the height of Red's chest. He stood a moment, panting, the lust for vengeance in him. He tried the sash cautiously. The window was open.

The others were coming up. He showed them by signs what he wanted to do, not daring to speak. The McBride boys gave him a hand, lifting him. He sprang inside the house without a sound.

In a moment the two boys were with him, and were pulling Seth over the sill. The wounded man groaned a little but managed to make it. Red crept forward, exploring the disposition of furniture. The house seemed utterly still. The room they had entered was large, evidently a downstairs sitting room.

After a moment or two of fumbling, Red found a door. He turned the knob with great care. It led into a hall, where a dim light burned, a candle in a lantern hung from the ceiling. The four prowled into the passageway. There were doors leading right and left, one at each end of the hall.

It was a strange layout for a house. Red stopped a moment, trying to orient himself. They had come in from the east, straight across the grounds. The excitement of eliminating the two sentries had caused him to enter the house without stopping to reconnoiter—a bad military move, he admitted.

It was Ephraim who settled it. He came close to Red, and his eyes were large as saucers. Panic-stricken, he whispered, "Oh, Doc! We got—we got—"

"What?" demanded Red fiercely.

"We're in—we're in the ell where the Sisters live!"

They were in the section of the house set aside for the "Sisters" of the Bishop —his wives sealed to him in the Church of the Latter Day Saints!

Seth said, "It's true, Doctor! And this part is cut off from the rest of the house. Like a separate stronghold."

Red rallied. "Your wife is captive here, you thought. We shall get her our first!"

"But who? How? Who will enter these rooms and confront the Sisters?"

Red stood baffled in the middle of the hall. To come this far and be defeated by tragi-comedy was too much. He glared at the half-dozen doors. He was almost ready to begin an assault upon one when at the end of the hall nearest the front of the establishment a portal slowly swung wide.

Four guns swerved. The man in the doorway stood, blinking foolishly, clad in nightshirt and slippers, a lighted candle in his hand.

Red said, "Come in, Bishop. We were waiting for you!"

IT was Seth Cavan who slipped down and closed the door behind the blinking, terrified Cowderey. The Bishop stammered:

"What—how did you—what are you intending?"

"The release of Mrs. Cavan, first," said Red briskly. "And if you raise your voice, the end of you!"

"I was—I was about to see to her," said the Bishop.

"In those clothes?" demanded Red. "Shame!"

"Er—I mean—I was—"

Behind Red a feminine voice called, "Oh, Nephi! Is that you, darling?"

Red whirled. A young woman was peering into the hall, her hair streaming on her shoulders. She took one look at the four men with guns. She disappeared, the door slammed, her scream echoed and re-echoed into the night.

"The fat," murmured Red, "is now in the fire. Bishop! Take us to Mrs. Cavan! *Pronto!*"

The Bishop stumbled forward, led them to a door, unlocked it from a bunch of keys which dangled from his wrist. Mother Cavan was fully dressed, quite composed. She said, "I knew you'd come. Can we escape now?"

Red said, "Seth! Get back through that sitting room! Out the window. Take her to safety—you know where! Quick!"

Seth did not remonstrate. He led his wife through the door. The Bishop's teeth were chattering now. He said:

"They—Brother Pixley—they'll be here in a moment."

Red said, "We've no desire to hurt you. Get into the sitting room. Take your wives with you in there and—maybe you'd better pray, Bishop!"

Doors were opening up and down the hall. The Bishop rallied, trying to brave it out before his wives. Red said:

"Let's get out of here! To the front!"

The McBride boys were without hesitation. They followed Red, close as sticking plasters. They went through the door which the Bishop had entered, their revolvers drawn.

There was a short passageway, another heavy door. Ephraim said, "Here's a window. We can get out and into the grounds."

Red peered through the glass. There were men moving, he heard a hoarse command. He said, "Too late. The woman aroused them. We can only go ahead and trust to luck."

He tried the big door and it gave. They went into a store-room, through it to another sitting room. They did not hear nor see a soul.

Red said, "Pixley is too smart. He's letting us trap ourselves. Boys — I'm sorry."

Ephraim McBride said, "You did us a turn. We ain't been likin' Joel Pixley for years. Pa said to go through with this. We ain't sorry."

His brother, the silent youth, grunted. Red led them to another door. It was locked and resisted his efforts to break through.

He could hear Pixley's voice, now. "Surround the house. We've got them like rats in a trap! We'll shoot them down and burn their bodies, the dirty rapists! They were after the Bishop's wives! You heard the woman scream, Brothers!"

"Smart," said Red, shaking his head. "He'll have the whole town down upon us now. Take a window. Thank the Lord there are only three—one apiece."

Pixley seemed to be on the other side of the heavy door. He called in a loud voice. "Mathew! Will you surrender?"

Red held the Colt's waist-high and let a bullet ride through the door. He heard a curse, a scrambling of feet. Pixley bellowed, "He shot Brother Jakes! Fire on him, brothers! Kill the gentile!"

Another voice cried, "We got Seth Cavan, Pixley! He was escapin' through the grounds, him and his woman!"

"Bind them!" ordered Pixley. "They'll suffer blood atonement later. Kill me this Mathew!"

THE first shot sounded. A bullet ripped through the window, spatted into the wall. Others followed in a ragged volley; a shotgun burst tore a window frame to pieces.

Red said, "You all right, boys?"

"Yes, sir," chorused the McBrides calmly. Ephraim leaned forward and fired his revolver. Outside a man yelled. Esau followed suit from his window. Red spied a moving figure in the garden and snapped twice. The man fell and his screams added to the noise of battle.

The gunfire mounted as reinforcements joined Pixley's trained murderers. The din mounted. Pixley was safely out of range, but Red had no doubt that when the kill came the renegade Mormon would be in on it. Pixley was courageous enough. He was merely cautious that his own skin be saved for future deeds of glory.

The capture of Seth and his wife was the worst blow, Red realized. They were beleaguered by a hundred men, he supposed, but if Seth could have got through and the wagons were already into the Skillet, help might come in the person of Sam Tabor. Now, it was the two McBrides and himself against Soladi.

There was no comfort in the thought. He fired at another dim figure, reloaded his revolver. He wished he had the Sharps rifle, but then he wished he had General under him, too, and he wished he could see Prudence once more.

Before he died, he thought, he would see Pixley. He would go out there, when it got too hot, and let them kill him, but first he would make sure of Pixley. His massacred mother and father and kindly, brave Colonel Ramsay called for that meeting. . . .

They were certainly ruining the Bishop's house. The lead poured from every angle as Pixley distributed his forces with cunning. Splinters from the sills splattered the defenders, plaster crashed down upon them from the ceiling.

Then there was a pause, as if a blanket had been thrown upon the scene. Red said quickly:

"They'll charge. Pile furniture in front of the windows and hold your fire until I give the command."

The McBrides were quick. They put chairs, a desk, a whatnot spilling gimcracks, a secretary, and a grandfather's clock before the three windows. In a moment there was the sound of advancing feet. Pixley was not howling his orders now. He and his lieutenants were proceeding with military skill.

Red crouched, watching the mass of attacking men. It was suicide for some of them, but others would get through. They would, he knew, have fired the house long

since if the Bishop and his wives had not been inside. This desperate charge was necessary unless they wanted a long seige, and Pixley was too greedy for Red's death for that.

The attackers came on. Red could see their wide, staring eyes as they ran. He let them come. He held both Colt's steady, kneeling behind a table. They were at the window, thrusting shotguns inside, trying to enfilade the room.

Red cut loose. He heard the McBrides immediately as they took the wordless cue. His .45's spoke slowly, with emphasis at each heavy discharge. Smoke again filled the room, the acrid odor bit into his nostrils. Men fell away from the windows. He counted his shots, saving two.

The Mormons were gone. He waited, holding the guns ready. A big man sprang into the opening with a shotgun. Red dropped him in his tracks.

Another came. Red's bullet clipped him in the head, bowled him over.

He was reloading, then. But Pixley had counted shots, had mercilessly sacrificed two of his men. Another form came into the breach. This time the charge of the gun exploded. Red felt something claw at him. The table took most of the discharge, but he was hit.

One of the McBrides cried out, too. The other was cursing steadily, firing his gun, which he had miraculously found time to reload.

Red's hands fumbled a little, pressing the bullets home into the hot cylinders of the Colt's. Pixley was yowling again:

"Go in there! Get them!"

THEY would, too. There was no chance, now. It took at least three unhit, alert, strong men to defend against a townful. Red managed to get his Colt's loaded, filling all six cylinders of each. He got to his feet. He could walk, all right. His chest was full of partly deflected buckshot and he was bleeding a lot, but he could walk. He only wanted to face Pixley for a moment. Just one split second. It did not seem much to ask.

He said, "Fight it out, boys. God bless you!"

He started for the window. A man came up and thrust a revolver in his face. It was, he saw, the fanatic Moroni Tanner. Red shot almost without thinking about him. He wanted Pixley. He was in full view, now, ready to take the payment of lead in his vitals. He strained his eyes for a sight of Pixley. . . .

The shots did not come. He heard Pixley's voice, crying, "Stand up to them! It's only a handful! Kill them all!"

There were thundering hoofs on the street of Soladi. There was a loud, crackling voice, shouting, "Run, damn you! Scatter! I'll give you blood atonement!"

There was steady, booming shooting. Mary Cavan's voice cried:

"To the house! They're in the Bishop's house!"

Red got to the window. He half fell into the yard. There was confusion all about, now. Sam Tabor rode a big, black horse through the Bishop's flower garden. Sam's guns were smoking. He looked like a giant, raging demon. Mormons sprang for safety, but Sam cracked two of them from their feet.

Pru was close behind. She was leading a riderless steed. Red recognized General and managed to stagger into view. The girl called:

"Sam! There he is!"

Red got his hand on the pommel of his saddle. He muttered, "The McBride boys! In the house!"

Prudence moaned, "You're hurt. Oh, they've shot you!"

"Clean up," Red said. "Go to it, Sam."

"We're all here!" said Sam. "Even old Tom! Listen to them!"

Regan and Holmes were loose at last. The Texan cowboy howl—"Yip-peee! Hiyah, yip-peeee!"—scourged the air of Soladi.

Mormons were running by the dozens before the determined, scathing fire of the cowhands. Tom McBride was riding a Hatt horse, swaying a little, but firing at recognized enemies. Mary Cavan rescued her father and mother from their captors and put them on spare horses from the Hatt remuda.

"We come prepared," said Sam. "Here we go again!"

He spurred his horse into the street. Red hauled himself into the saddle. Prudence was saying:

"General came in. We heard the shoot-

ing. We were just getting away. We had to come, Red."

"Take care of the McBrides—in the house. And keep out of gunfire, darling," muttered Red. "I'm going, now."

She held out her hands, "No!" Don't go! You're hurt!"

He shook his head. The wounds were beginning to sting, and pretty soon he would not be able to move. He said, "'By, angel!"

He rode down the street. At the camp there would be only Chin Lee to protect the cattle and Eli Hatt. He urged the roan on across the plain, seeking no concealment. He knew Joel Pixley, now, knew him for a clever devil.

THE herd was milling a little as he came up. The camp-fire was low, but he saw three figures hastening at tasks. The wagons were hitched to travel. Eli Hatt was in one of them, helpless in the grip of fever.

Red unlimbered the Colt's. His left hand was no good, so he wrapped the reins about the pommel and steered General in with his knees.

The men were running for their horses, abandoning the torches with which they had intended to fire the wagons. Pixley had taken two of his bodyguards with him in his flight, Red saw. Leave it to Pixley!

The first man had a rifle. He knelt to fire, and Red took first shot. The man dropped the gun and fell across the feet of his horse, which bolted immediately.

The second man was mounted. He raised his gun, aiming carefully. Red gave General the right knee. The roan swerved like the gallant cow-pony he was.

The Mormon missed. But Red did not miss.

Pixley was farthest away. He was holding that most redoubtable of weapons, a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun. He was waiting his chance with calmness and dignity. He was, Red thought, a very great villain, a general who let his men die, but always won the last engagement.

The shotgun came up. Pixley's bearded, white face in the moonlight was overcast with a mask of sweat. He pressed the trigger of the first barrel.

Red gave General the signal. The horse seemed to stumble. He rolled over and over on the ground. Red, somehow managing, despite his wound, roused to the greatest effort of his life, flung himself through the air. For a moment he lay stunned as the shotgun blast roared overhead.

He made himself remain quiet, expecting any moment that the second barrel would rake him, yet not believing that Pixley would take a chance at that range. Moments passed. Then the quiet steps of a horse moved toward him.

He counted them, gauging the distance. He counted to twenty, his pulses pounding his body almost to pieces. Then, without looking, he flung himself sideways and raised his revolver.

He was almost under the hoofs of Pixley's horse. He fired upwards. He had one glimpse of the amazement upon the Mormon renegade's face. Then he was on the far side, evading the flying hoofs of the horse, firing once, twice at the falling body.

Pixley's hands dug at the dirt. His feet drummed the earth, his whole body convulsed like a leaping salmon. He was dying, but he was dying hard. Red stood and watched, his eyes cold, the revolver ready for a finisher. Pixley groaned:

"I— go to Joseph! I have been faithful in the Church!"

He collapsed like an old accordion. He lay very still upon the plain. He was dead.

Red crawled over to his roan. General shook himself and got to his feet. Red mounted clumsily and started back for Soladi. There was work for a doctor in Soladi.

BISHOP COWDEREY said, "I got to say, Doc, you cured a heap of 'em. The fever is over and plenty gunshot wounds has healed. Brother Pixley was a mite too hasty in his ways, Doc. Us Mormons got a new order comin' up, I fear me."

"I've been here four weeks," said Red dryly, "and no one has come down from the north to avenge Pixley. I know you are right. Your president is in hiding. The end of plural marriages is in sight."

The Bishop coughed. "We will not go into that, Doctor. I understand Seth

Cavan and his family are goin' with you to Wyoming."

"And the McBrides," said Red.

The Bishop sighed. "We are losing members. Joseph prophesied that we would be persecuted and jailed and killed. But he said nothing about losing members. I must go and pray, Doctor. Good-by. And thank ye!"

The Bishop turned away.

Redfern Matthew rode out of Soladi, and every step of the way was lined with silent people who waved sadly to see the doctor leave.

The Bishop had come through, after Pixley's death. Order had been restored, and Red had gone to work. His little tools, the scalpels and other instruments from the oilskin packet, had stood him in good stead to patch the wounds inflicted by his guns and those of the others.

They were all well and fit to travel. The wagons were again lined up, ready for the northward trip. No need to go back through the Skillet now. The Cavans and McBrides would be their passport through Utah.

There were new wagons for the Mormons who went along. There were a few sheep and some domestic cattle to stock the farmland 'n Wyoming. Eli Hatt was stouter and the picture of health. Red rode up, and Sam Tabor came on the black horse and stopped him. Sam said:

"Uh—Red. I got a question to ask you."

Red said, "You and Mary, too?"

The dark girl was riding a buckskin pony, dressed in a gown which Red had never seen before, a flowered, gay young dress. Sam blurted:

"Is—are Mormon marriages okay for us?"

"Go down and ask the Bishop," said Red. "Who am I to say?"

Sam said, "Uh—well, we thought. . . ."

Red leaned over and kissed the blushing Mary on the cheek. "God bless you, my children," he grinned.

They rode off, lickety split. Red went to the wagon where Prudence sat upon the seat, clad in her old blue jeans and her boots. Her long hair was down again, caught in the back with a blue ribbon.

Red said, "Not going to see the happy pair married, Pru?"

Her face was stony. "No!"

"Not even if I ask you?"

"No!"

Red took a deep breath. He had not allowed himself to think of it, ever, until Pixley was dead. Since then he had been so busy with the sick and wounded he had hardly spoken to Pru, save to give orders about the nursing. He said:

"Not even if I ask you to make it a double hitch?"

She stood up. Solemnly, she took the blue ribbon from her hair. She reached into the wagon and got a red ribbon, very bright. She replaced the dull blue with the red. She said:

"That is different, Red. Catch me up a horse!"

PALEFACE COMANCHE

By JACK STERRETT

Blue Lizard snatched his tomahawk as he heard the drum of Mingo's running feet.

The scalp-stalking brave chose disgrace and the merciless judgment of his tribe —to spare a flaxen-haired girl.

MINGO knew he was a white man —maybe. You can't be positive about that—because he had been a Comanche since infancy. But he knew that he had red hair as curly as that of some of the white men his tribe had scalped. And eyes as blue.

If he ever thought about it at all, probably that's as far as it went. Just the vague sense that he was different from his darker-skinned brothers of the Staked Plains.

While on a cattle-stealing raid, Tisko Big Foot had snatched him from a cradle in a little sod shack near the Texas Colorado when he was barely a month old. Without any knowledge of change, Mingo had been shifted from his mother to Big Foot's squaw. And Spotted Fawn was the adoring parent he grew up to know and love. No slim young thing, but a fat and jolly Comanche, she spoiled him atrociously—almost never punished him.

Nobody in the tribe ever told Mingo he was white. In fact, as he grew old enough to comprehend, white men were never mentioned in his presence—not because of any desire to spare Mingo's feelings, but out of respect and sympathy for Big Foot and Spotted Fawn. When, in desperate need of soothing his squaw's aching breasts because her own week-old babe was dead, Big Foot had snatched the white child from its home, there may have been those who thought the impulsive action unwise. But no word was ever breathed against it.

Yet they say an Indian has no heart! Those who think so should have been there when Mingo came to Tisko Big Foot's lodge. They would have seen solemn men and women who nodded approvingly and pronounced the infant as lusty and fine a young Comanche as they had ever seen—these remarks making Spotted Fawn's dark eyes grow large and bright and making Big Foot's chest expand.

Well, probably the Comanches did have no heart, no brotherly love, and little else but burning hate—for white men. To them the whites were the murderers of their women and children, the defilers of their waterholes, and despoilers of their hunting grounds. The whites were the bitter enemy who had sworn to rid the land of every last Comanche!

MINGO was eighteen. Six feet tall, he was lithe and powerful as a man though still a boy in years. Hunched over and sneaking swiftly through a thin forest of piñon and chaparral, he was a coppery shadow clad only in breech-cloth and soundless doeskin moccasins. He was one of a half-dozen coppery shadows fading swiftly through the woods.

In Mingo's left hand was a long bow of Osage orange. In all his gliding, muscular movements was the deadly grace of a panther, his face set and his blue eyes cold and purposeful. For neither Mingo nor his silent and furtive companions were here for an afternoon's stroll. Nor was it food they sought. They hunted the two-legged paleface enemy.

Suddenly they were at the edge of the woods and sank down from sight for a whispered consultation. Mingo's eyes wandered down the slope, dotted here and there with blackberry tangles and clumps of scrub oak, to the rolling yellow sea of the plains. Across that sea cut the green wake of willows and sycamores which followed the winding course of a river.

Mingo had little knowledge of the ways of the white men, but the tribe had been told that recently the paleface settlers had been drifting into this wide valley in ever-increasing numbers, herding cattle and driving those high wagons which looked like drifting clouds.

He could understand why they should want to come here. It was a beautiful country. There was plenty of water and the land was rich. Here at certain seasons, the tribe could always count on game—buffalo, antelope, partridge, and big, strutting turkeys fat with piñon nuts. It was easy enough to understand why the whites came—but they would, as they always did, destroy all this. And the Comanches would either starve or move farther back into the burning deserts. Or kill! And Mingo's eyes grew cold and glittering as fragments of shattered blue glass.

Painstakingly, oblivious for the moment to the low-voiced talk of his brothers, he searched every billow and hollow of the plains. He looked for anything that might betray the presence or location of the whites—any distant, thin pencil of smoke or stratified haze, any flicker of sunlight on metal, any movement of wild game which would indicate it had been disturbed. And at last he saw something so close at hand and so startling that he caught his breath in his throat and made

no move at all to warn his friends.

At the edge of a blackberry thicket not over fifty yards down the slope from the piñon bench, Mingo saw a small brown dog whose questing and quivering nose was pointed straight toward the hideout of the lurking Comanches. His wet nose was black as ink and shiny as glass and his alert eyes were as shiny as black glass beads. He was trembling on the verge of a clamorous uproar but, just for the moment, the air was so still that he was not sure of the scent he had caught. And he was a smart dog. He had learned never to bark at merely imaginary things, but only when he could do some good.

Immediately, Mingo's probing stare searched for the dog's master. He was as poised and intent as the little hound and when he caught sight of the white girl he was held for a long moment almost without power to move. Something reached out and seized him by the throat. Some shaking and frightening thing surged through his body and made him weak and helpless to do anything more than stare.

Happily unconscious of the screaming red death which lurked so near, the girl was busily filling a pail with the ripe richness of blackberries. The fruit hung so thick about her that she scarcely had to move to pick, and her homespun dress, dyed butternut brown and edged with dark green, was almost a perfect blend with the tangle which hid her.

Through that screening thicket, Mingo's piercing eyes had found her unerringly by the brilliant scarlet—as bright as blood on a bird's breast—of her berry-stained lips moving in the sunlight. And from that single dash of arresting color, he had shaped the rest of her face, delicately formed and creamy white and brown. Escaping from her sunbonnet, a lock of her hair, he saw, was like ripe wheat.

He had no standard by which to judge this beauty. The Comanche maids he had liked had been round and soft and with great dark eyes and shining black hair. The white maiden's looks were foreign entirely. Yet he was almost visibly shaken by the surging upheaval which took place within him. He had no way of understanding it, and he was frightened. And he was driven by a suddenly passionate compulsion to get quickly away from here —and to get his brothers away before they could discover the white maid's presence! Without reasoning, instantly, he had to do that!

IMMEDIATELY, he clapped his palms together in a soft but urgent warning, and, as his companions instantly turned their heads and thrusting eyes toward him, he gestured excitedly of a deadly and overwhelming peril. Bent almost double, he whirled about and fled back into the forest. Without question, his brothers followed him like phantoms pursued. And even as they went, hurrying them to startled and bounding speed a little dog back in the open raised a sudden shrill frenzy of barking that would have been a credit to a whole pack of hounds.

The unknown danger pressed them to far greater speed and a safer distance than would have any measurable peril and they were fairly winded when they slowed down in a distant aisle of the forest. They were young and proud and distinctly ashamed of the panic they had shown. As a consequence they were insistent on an entirely adequate explanation of what it was Mingo had seen to set off such ignominious flight. And Mingo, badly upset and filled with consternation that he could be such a fool, wondered if he was going crazy—but was sane enough to try to tell a lie big enough to satisfy them.

"How they reached there—how long they had lain there—this one has no way of knowing. He is no bird and was not standing in the sky when it happened. But the blackberry thickets were filled with whites with long rifles. This one saw a little dog, first, watching us as a rabbit watches."

Answering tumbling, tumultuous questions, he failed to notice that one young Comanche, dark and lean-faced as a hawk, twisted his lips in a queer expression and slid away unnoticed through the trees.

"How many were there? As many as the leaves of the thickets, perhaps. Many times our strength. With ugly white faces and great black beards."

They were glad they had escaped from that danger, but were more than a little puzzled that the whites had not pursued them. Perhaps the palefaces had not discovered them until the instant of their flight. Mingo's eyes were as sharp as an

eagle's, most certainly. He had seen all this where they had seen nothing!

Riding beside him after they had secured their horses from the place in which they had hidden them, Raven talked excitedly. But not for one instant did he relax his sharp watchfulness, his dark eyes constantly darting from side to side. Raven was Mingo's best friend. Tisko Big Foot's son, he was Mingo's elder by two years, and, though only a foster-brother, could not have been closer had their blood been the same.

"Now then," Raven said jubilantly. "My brother's sharpness has saved our lives and the tribe will be grateful." He struck his palm against a naked thigh. "The tribe will gather its fiercest warriors. This is good medicine! My brother will lead us and we will kill all the whites in one great battle. Once again, this land will be our own—and ours alone!"

But Mingo was moody. Strangely, he could feel no eagerness. Certainly, he felt no pride in what he had done. It had been a bad lie—certain to make him the laughing-stock of the whole Comanche nation, if it was learned that he had stampeded the tribe's toughest warriors from a white maiden and a little dog only twice the size of a fat groundhog. Evil omens—was he losing his mind? Was the white maiden a witch that she had stolen his courage and turned his bones to milk?

He was uneasy about Blue Lizard. If he had an enemy in the tribe it was Blue Lizard, and it had been discovered when they recovered their horses that Blue Lizard had left them. Mingo could feel in his veins there was no good in that.

"And there is this," Raven rattled on exultantly. "When Blue Lizard rejoins us, he will be able to tell us where the whites have hidden their lodges—how many squaws and papooses they have, and how we may best attack them. Blue Lizard is smart, too. It was wise of him to go scouting."

Mingo merely grunted and scowled, lips twisted, blue eyes dull and shadowed. Nothing would please Blue Lizard better than to make a fool out of Mingo!

Suddenly they kneed their horses aside and disappeared from the trail into the thickets like a covey of scattering quail. As in a many times rehearsed military maneuver they were all gone in an instant, out of sight and out of sound, and no motion betrayed their lurking places. Down wind had come the screaming of a bluejay as the bird fled pell-mell through the aisles of the forest. Plain warning of some alien approach.

As they held their breaths and waited with notched and drawn arrows, the voice of another bird came drifting through the woods, and they relaxed. It was the cawing of a crow—talking in an almost human manner in its strange bird lingo. Broad smiles overspread the painted, dark faces of the crouching braves. Blue Lizard! He was afoot and running to overtake them—and cursing them because they had not left his horse behind.

But Mingo saw no humor in the situation. His first look at Blue Lizard's gaunt and hollow-cheeked face was a warning. He braced himself. Blue Lizard's beady eyes were gleaming with a malicious triumph as he rejoined them, and they slid down from their barebacked ponies to hear what he had to say.

Thin lips curved in a sardonic smile, Blue Lizard eyed Mingo mockingly for a long time before he said anything. Squatted on his heels, he panted heavily until he had regained his breath. And all the time he stared at Mingo, and Mingo stared back. Queer questions began to race in the minds of the young warriors. For, certainly, something out of the common was wrong.

"Come—what is it, Blue Lizard? You have rested long enough—what is it you have seen?"

BLUE LIZARD rose slowly to his full height, very tall, gaunt, and stringy as rawhide. And as he stared harshly at Mingo, his lips now parted in an open sneer. "Well, then, this is what I have seen! A little brown dog," and he held his hands close together to show how small the dog was, "who was very much excited. Only that little dog—and a single white maiden who had spilled all the blackberries she had been picking and was running in terror down the hill. I saw that it was this from which brave Mingo caused us to flee!"

There was an excited tumult of conjecture and questions through which Blue

Lizard's sneering insistence was as the cold and cruel thrusting of a knife. Yes, there had certainly been only the woman and the little dog. Those two were the army of bearded men courageous Mingo had seen in the thickets. How great and strong was Mingo that he would make jokes of the braves of the Comanche nation—through fear of a little yapping dog and a frightened white maid!

Mingo's deeply tanned skin flooded a tomato-red with shame. Yet he was not blue-eyed and red-headed for nothing, and where a true Comanche would have been as cold and sneering as Blue Lizard was —Mingo suddenly lost his head in a wild fury of temper. His eyes flamed and his fiery hair fairly bristled. He was a credit to some distant Irish ancestry.

"Blue Lizard lies!" Mingo roared furiously. He looked as though he would leap on the tall warrior with smashing, knotted fists. "Blue Lizard was born a liar! If there was only the maiden, why does he return empty-handed? Why did he not bring back her scalp—or even the tail of her little dog?"

Blue Lizard's knife leaped from his belly-band. His gaunt naked body crouched, and for an instant it looked as though they would fly at each other's throats. Mingo's bronzed big body trembled with fury.

Then Blue Lizard straightened and drew back haughtily. His thin lips skinned back from his teeth as he slowly put away the long blade. In his soul he was concealing the fact that to have pursued the girl he would have had to leap out into the open and that he was afraid there really might have been hidden palefaces. Also, the girl had been frantically clutching a long rifle as she sped down the hill and he had been afraid that she might know how to use it too well.

Lowered lids almost hid Blue Lizard's glittering eyes as he looked at Mingo. "There is this one thing which can be proven," he said in a sneering, cruel voice. "Brave Mingo's blood was turned to stinking rain-water in his veins at sight of the maiden's white face—*because Mingo is a white man!*"

As one man, his brother Raven and all of them, they looked at Mingo. For one instant more, the glaring fury in his blue eyes was a crouched and tail-lashing beast. Then that animal slowly sank down and crept back from sight and his eyes remained only dull and sullen. The veins beat heavily in his throat and his face was crimson with shame as he turned his head away. This thing which had finally been thrown at him hurt as bitterly as a lance through the groin. It turned him sick and he was shaken. For the moment, he had no words.

"Mingo!" said Raven.

Mingo shook his head dully. The hurt was dark in his eyes as he looked at them and saw their thoughts in their faces. All his life he had been a Comanche. Never had he been anything but a Comanche. Now, suddenly, he was something else—and knew that, somehow, he had always been. Blue Lizard had spoken a terrible truth!

Yet he fought against it with a sick intensity. His lips turned to a grim white line in his haggard face.

"Can the mad coyote ever speak anything but lies?" Mingo said huskily. "This I will do to prove that Blue Lizard has never known the truth. I will go back alone. And when I return again to the village of my brothers—I will bring a white man's scalp. Maybe not just one —maybe more. But anyway I will do this thing alone to prove I am a Comanche. Then," and his eyes blazed briefly as they struck fire against Blue Lizard's, "will Blue Lizard answer to me and repeat what he has said—if he dares!"

Abruptly, Mingo turned away from them and strode toward his horse. Raven hurried after him and, as Mingo leaped up to the pony's bare back, placed his hand on Mingo's knee.

"Brother, in my heart I go with you. And if you do this thing, you make a strong medicine. For you are not white—you are really Comanche."

But as their eyes held for an instant, both knew Raven was wrong. And there, in that moment, they said good-by to the things that could never again be shared between them.

FEEDING himself with piñon nuts and berries, with birds and squirrels knocked down by a blunt arrow, Mingo skulked through the woods for three days

along the benches which drooped down through the abrupt hills to the open plains. And he was saddened, but also strangely stirred, by the things he discovered.

Winding up a long circuit of restless travel, not for almost a year had his tribe been back to this rich country. And all the disturbing whispers which had grapevined to reach them from time to time were all too true, he found. Indeed, the whites had penetrated this valley in great strength. Every day, almost every hour, he discovered more evidences of their presence and numbers. They were practically as many as the Comanches in the village beyond the forested ridges, women and children included.

They were neither careless nor foolish, these whites. It was obvious that they fully understood they had reached a region for which the Comanche nation would put up a bitter and savage fight. Yet they seemed unafraid and determined to hold their ground. They had built a great fort of logs snaked from the forest. A huge stockade with ponderous gates within which huddled corrals for their cattle and horses, and a dozen sturdy cabins.

They had built the fort against the sloping wall of a rocky butte, the sheer cliffs of which were entirely unclimbable from any side except that which the log stockade embraced. And on top of the butte paced constant sentries, day and night.

Each afternoon, a full hour before dark, the herds were driven in from the grassy plains and sheltered inside the stockade. The playing children, the toiling men and women, wandered in and the great gates were shut. The fort looked like a part of the butte—and as strong.

Mingo was saddened, because he could read the certainty that here was a people which had come to stay. Not all the Indians in the plains country could uproot them. Before this white plague, the red man's free existence was doomed. Somehow, Mingo understood this clearly—as though some strange sight had been given him with which he could gaze down the river of history to the ocean of the future.

He was in no hurry. He knew that, undoubtedly, the whites were under constant observation now by lurking warriors of his tribe. But he also knew they would give him all the time he wanted in which to prove his blood and his training. They would not interfere, nor spy upon him. And only Blue Lizard would be talking against him, whispering ugly insinuations. Before this strange adventure was done, he and Blue Lizard would have to fight —to the death.

Twice during the first two days he saw the girl with the wheaten hair, and learned that she now daily herded a bunch of milk cows to pasture in the morning, to the river twice during the day, and back to the stockade in the evening. She was never beyond rifle-shot of the stockade itself and always kept her cattle herded well away from brush or thickets which might conceal lurking redskins. She watered them at a shallow ford where no trees nor undergrowth stood. Yet in spite of the difficulties and the sure and steady way in which she carried her long rifle, Mingo made up his mind to look on her face once more at close quarters.

This, in the confusion which had grown in his mind, was a thing which now had to be done! Somehow, if he could only look at her face, he might be given the answer to the strangling doubts and hesitations thrown up by the battle between his heart and his mind—between his racial heritage and the training of his lifetime. It became a throbbing tumult in his throat. Even though it meant his death—he had to see the white maid by daylight.

STEPPING with lithe suppleness, she came through the early sunlight to the watering place, leading her cows. Her strong and shapely body was erect, her eyes alert, and her smooth face quiet and determined. Her long-barreled rifle was always ready in her firm hands. Yet, in response to the sharp delight of the freshness of the early morning and in answer to the irresponsible hullabaloo of the marsh birds, her lips were curved in a smile.

She stepped to a flat rock around which the water twined with a gurgling whisper, and grounded her rifle. Then out of the bulrushes scarce two yards away, Mingo slid up like a soundless and glistening, wet-skinned snake.

The girl's eyes shot wide. She tried

frantically to bring up her rifle, but, leaping in with one bound, Mingo struck the weapon out of her hand and caught her up in steel-muscled arms. One hand clamped like a vise over her mouth, he hunched over and bounded upstream. The leafy concealment of a thicket of willows, impenetrable to watching eyes, swayed apart and closed behind them.

The entire action took place without a sound other than the brief clatter of her rifle as it fell to the rocks. It took place within the brief space of fifteen seconds. Providing no white man had been glancing directly toward the ford in that brief time, Mingo was safe.

She had stopped her useless struggling against his lithe and terrible power. He saw that she had gained control and would not be likely to scream. Abruptly, he lowered her to her feet and released her. In the dappled, dancing green light of the willows, they stared at each other.

She panted for breath, red lips parted over glistening teeth. Her cheeks were stained crimson with racing blood. Her eyes were wide. But they held no fear. And Mingo was held motionless, mesmerized almost, lost in a vast and helpless bewilderment at the wonder of the light and life in those deep pools of color. For her eyes were blue, as blue as glowing sky seen through a break in raincloud. They were as blue as the cornflower. They were as blue as his own!

Mingo was completely absorbed in contemplation of this stunning discovery. As nothing else in the world could have done, he had been shown by these blue eyes in which he immersed himself the real truth of his kinship and blood. Without framing the idea in words, he somehow grasped the knowledge of his racial heredity, and was an Indian no more.

In sudden confusion, Mingo drew back a step from the girl. He made the sign of peace, slipped his tomahawk from the waistband of his breech-cloth and threw it aside. Thus, he signed, he placed himself at her mercy. Embarrassed, now, by her intent and wondering stare, he turned his head aside. He had no way of knowing that she, as well as he, had been stunned and held by the sight of clear blue eyes.

"You're a white man!" she cried.

He knew none of the words but clearly understood their meaning by her manner. He looked at her again and saw that she was not afraid at all, that her breathing was now even and steady, and that she looked at him with wonder and interest. He smiled and spoke. He reached for her hand and turned it so that the creamy white flesh of her inner arm was exposed. He turned his own arm and his white teeth flashed.

His Comanche was uttered in a pleasant voice. "Yes—it can be seen that you and I are of one blood."

Plainly, the girl understood, too. For she smiled in response, and Mingo's heart was taken away from him.

But she was puzzled, too. She pulled her eyebrows together in a heavy frown. "Who are you? Why are you dressed like an Indian? Where are you from? Don't you speak English? You're not really an Indian—were you made a captive as a little boy? Where are your people? How many are there? Are they friendly or hostile?" These and a thousand other questions trembled on her soft lips. And some of them she uttered.

Mingo squatted on his heels and smoothed a clean space on the damp ground. With a sharp stick he drew pictures. Also, looking into her eyes, he gestured eloquently or grunted occasional soft syllables of Comanche. And she was able to follow him almost as perfectly as though he spoke her tongue.

SHE learned that he had nursed at the breast of a Comanche—and so must have been newly born when taken by the tribe. He had no memories but those of his tribe. Until now, he had never seen a white woman to speak to. He had seen only a few white men, all at a distance, while he hid in the brush. His tribe were as many as her village. They were beyond the first ridge of mountains. There were other Comanche villages, farther distant. The Comanche nation numbered thousands. He had come here to kill her—or to kill and scalp some white men—but now he could not. He was a white man. He had just discovered this.

"Go to the fort with me and let other white men see you. Tell them your story." In sign language of her own, she tried

to persuade him to this. But always he shook his head and she presently understood that, although he was now white and had no desire to kill whites, still he had learned to hate white men and could not in a minute throw off the habits of a lifetime.

She had never seen anybody like him. Like other Indians, he had painfully plucked his face clean of all beard and his features were smooth, bronzed, and lean. Although he was plainly very young, he had the character, strength and maturity of a man much older. His jaw, lips, and nose were aggressive and powerful, his eyes fearless and honest. His body, almost completely naked, seemed completely and modestly clothed because of its smooth and even tan. It was a tall body, easy and graceful. Yet, as she well knew, it contained amazing, swift power.

Regretfully, at last, since she could not make him consent to go with her, she signed that she must leave. Face suddenly serious and anxious, Mingo indicated that he would be in this place again, this evening. That, indeed, he would wait for her here all day. And his teeth flashed in a broad smile when she promised to return.

Running with the tireless, effortless pace of a wolf—for he had turned his pony loose to wander back to the village because he had chosen to be free of its care—Mingo spent all night and most of the next day on the trail. He had seen the white maiden again and learned that she called herself Marjorie. This was a strange combination of sounds he could not quite master, but which was often in his heart and on his lips like some haunting strain of music. He had shown her that he must return to his tribe, to make his peace with them if that could be done. Then, he had sighed, he would return.

He had not told her that he could not help but return. That he could not possibly stay long away from her. It was a thing he had not dared to admit openly to himself, the meaning of that strange breathlessness her smile caused him. But no doubt she had seen the look in his eyes and had understood. Because, for one brief minute as they said good-by, her own breathing had been quick and sharp, and her lips had trembled. For that one instant, she had been more completely disarmed than when he had struck her rifle from her hands.

Dropping swiftly down the western ridges of the mountains, Mingo approached Tisko Big Foot's village. He was filled with misgivings because, returning without the scalps he had sworn he would gather, he suspected that he would be met with scorn, if not open hostility. He had said he would prove he was Comanche and he had not done so.

As he drew near he gave the cry of the hunting wolf and was answered, and called again. Nobody spoke to him nor approached him as, through the gathering dusk he strode swiftly along the village street directly to his father's lodge. But he knew that many sharp eyes had scanned him closely. And he knew that their gaze had not missed the fact that no fresh scalps were dangling at his waist.

As he pulled aside the skin opening and ducked through the door of Tisko Big Foot's lodge, Mingo's heart was steeled. His father, the chief, was standing by the flickering fire in the middle of the lodge. He forced himself to turn his face directly toward the gaunt old man.

BIG FOOT'S smoldering eyes rested briefly on Mingo's empty waistband. His grim mouth straightened, and the end of his high-arched nose seemed to grow sharp. His eyes were remote and shadowed when they looked on Mingo's face.

"Tonight," Big Foot said in a measured and toneless voice. "My son will speak to the old men in council—and tell them why he has failed."

Mingo trembled. He knew how much the calm and emotionless statement had cost the old man. He knew that Big Foot would have been happier had his son been killed rather than to have failed in this vow he had taken. He turned his face aside as Big Foot moved past him with slow dignity and left the lodge. There was misery in his eyes as he looked at his brother, Raven.

What Raven said, wildly and in a hoarse and cracking voice, did not immediately seem to make sense to Mingo. "Some day," Raven swore brokenly, "I will cut out Blue Lizard's heart and crush it beneath my heel!"

Raven stumbled out and left Mingo

alone with his foster-mother Spotted Fawn

For a long time he could not bear to look at her. She was old and shapeless now, but still to him she was his mother and possessed his love—and he did not want to see how much he had hurt her. He squatted by the fire and reached for deer meat that simmered in the pot. But it was tasteless. It choked him and he spat it out. Desperately, he jerked his head toward her.

"I am ashamed!" he cried. "Here, now, in my tribe, I have no face! I have failed my oath and am nothing! But I could not—I could not kill a white man and scalp him! For, behold—I am a white man! This is true!"

For a long moment, Spotted Fawn gazed at him with dark and brimming eyes through which the break in her heart could be seen. Then she turned away. She bent her head and covered her face with her hands. Her body swayed slowly back and forth with soundless grief. After a long time, she spoke timidly, as though she scarcely dared, in a soft, trembling voice.

"Some day, perhaps, the white maiden will bear my son a child. And if that child is a man-child, then some day, perhaps, my son will know how a mother's heart can be broken."

Mingo caught his breath. He stared at her. But he said no more. Because he understood that, although unobserved by white men, red men had seen his meetings with the girl called Marjorie—and had reached their own conclusions. They considered that he had lost his heart to the white maiden and must return to her. They considered that he had indeed become a white man. And they were right. Deep within himself, Mingo admitted this.

At the council fire, later, he stated it calmly as a fact.

"I am white," he said flatly. And, standing by the fire, he stared around at the circle of grim, impassive faces and watchful eyes. He looked at his father and saw a face which had turned to stone. He looked beyond the old men and saw Raven with the young warriors—Blue Lizard, a sneer of triumph curling his lips.

"Yes," Mingo cried defiantly. "I am white! And I am not ashamed! Because within my heart I know that the whites are a wise and great people. I think, perhaps, that they are even as great as the Comanche."

The old men looked at each other and the young warriors muttered angrily.

Mingo threw back his head and half-closed his eyes. By their looks he knew they had already decided his fate, yet he would not go down without making his fight. His oration became almost a chant.

"I am white—you are red. Yet we have lived together as brothers. Big Foot, Raven—I am your child and brother. I have nursed at Spotted Fawn's breast. I am white—you are red. Yet I am your companion. I have known your joys and sorrows. I have shared them. I have suffered your hungers and thirsts. I have helped you in trouble and have exulted in your triumphs. You, Mishi, and you, Badger—Lightfoot, Cisco, Redeye—you and I are brothers. Even though I am white and you are red.

"And what does this mean unless it means that beneath their skins all whites and reds are brothers?"

For an hour, he talked. He reviewed his life. He took them in memory again along the trails they had traveled together. He spoke of birds and beasts and brown babies playing in the sun, of the wheeling stars and the changing seasons, of the never-ending and incredible wonder and richness of life. All seen by white and red alike. With a passion that he had not suspected was in him, he argued against the idiocy of war and bloodshed between white men and red.

They were respectful. No old man nor warrior moved to interrupt. They nodded and bowed in admiration for his logic. Yet when he was finished he knew the bitterness of defeat.

TISKO BIG FOOT went aside with the old men and when he came back he spoke to his blue-eyed son from lips which trembled only for an instant, then grew rigid and bloodless as stone.

"Mingo has failed of his oath. His manhood has broken, and he has failed his family and his tribe. Mingo can no longer be loyal to the Comanche. His blood has changed its color and he is no longer an Indian. He is a white man. Therefore,

Mingo is no longer my son and no longer Comanche—and he must die!"

He had been expecting it. Like a panther, he bounded across the fire and tried to break his way through the thinnest part of the circle of men. He was hurled back, borne down beneath a dozen naked bodies.

When at last he was subdued and dragged to his feet, bleeding and torn and with his hands bound behind him, Big Foot spoke to him again.

"This night Mingo will be granted. He will be allowed to think his own thoughts and to speak to those to whom he wishes to speak. He will die at daylight."

Raven came long after the village was asleep, slipping in soundlessly under the edge of the lodge in which Mingo was held captive. Raven cut the thongs which bound his ankles and wrists as firmly as circlets of steel, then thrust the knife into his hand and placed his lips against his ear.

"Come!"

As soundlessly as black shadows in the blackness of the night, they stole out of the village and up into the mountains. They traveled swiftly afoot. They paused for no word, for no word was needed between them. And in what was left of the night, they fled as though the whole village pursued them, all the way across the ridges toward that other valley where the whites had come to live. They covered all of that distance in the one night—because they had to.

At dawn, almost exhausted, they rested in the edge of the wood where Mingo had first seen the girl where the hill sloped down to the river and the open plain.

As gray daylight stole across the valley, Mingo turned.

"Now, this is farewell," he said softly. "My brother will return to his people and I go to mine. At first, Big Foot and his people will be angry with thee. But only at first."

"This is farewell," Raven agreed, as with a thing he was reluctant to face. He hesitated and, for a moment, his eyes were tortured. "But still—you are Comanche. And to me you will always be Comanche."

"Yes," Mingo said gently, "I will always be Comanche—to thee." He lifted his hand and because he could not bear more turned away abruptly and moved out of the trees.

Back straight, hands open and hanging by his sides, so any who watched could see that he was unarmed and came as a friend, he walked steadily down the hill.

Then, suddenly, death whispered past his ear, and he saw an arrow stand quivering in the ground before him. In the same instant there was a sharp sound of struggle behind him, a cry and a whispered snarl of rage. Whirling, he raced back toward the woods.

Raven and Blue Lizard were locked in a writhing deadly struggle, their bodies intertwined and thrashing like snakes—leaves and twigs thrown up in a storm from under their kicking feet. Leaping in, a strangled cry was torn from Mingo's throat as he saw that Blue Lizard's knife stood buried to the hilt beneath Raven's heart. Eyes bulging, face purple, Blue Lizard was wrenching his throat from Raven's dying grasp, fighting to turn as he heard the drum of Mingo's running feet. He burst free, snatched up his tomahawk. Then, terrified, he tried to run from the terrible fury blazing in Mingo's eyes.

In three great bounds Mingo overtook him. Leaping bodily on his back, he bore him to earth with a smashing shock which left them both half-stunned.

Yet, when Mingo arose and stood on shuddering legs, Blue Lizard was dead, strangled from existence by the awful vengeance in Mingo's hands.

Mingo's chest was heaving and he was sobbing with something more than shock as he stared blindly down at Raven and saw that he, too, was dead. Sudden tears flooded his eyes and a groan was torn from his throat. When he heard the long howl of a wolf and a yapping sound like the arguing of a pack of running coyotes he knew the Comanches came.

He whirled and burst out of the woods into the open again. And as he ran madly down the hill toward the river—toward a new life, to Marjorie—his face was wet and streaming with his tears.

THE LOBO FROM MASSACHUSETTS

A Roaring Novelet of the Dakotas

By JONATHAN W. CARVER

Devil's Den on the Upper Mizzou was a murder-trap for pilgrims. But the lone hunter from down-East had unfinished business with its bloody boss!

PETER CASSIDY smelled a fight; a shindig tinged with the acrid fumes of gunpowder smoke and burning hair. There was going to be trouble up in the Dakota Territory. When those men from the East began surveying a railroad route straight across the heart of the Sioux hunting grounds, sparks would surely fly. That meant a fight and where there was a fight there must be a Cassidy or it wouldn't be regular.

This was more than mere frontier rumor, for Cassidy had learned at Fort Leavenworth that the Army had shipped a regiment of cavalry all the way from Memphis to a new army post far up the Missouri to guard the men at their task.

The band of dust-caked, hard-bitten men with whom he had come eastward over the old Santa Fe Trail had broken up at Leavenworth. Cassidy, keeping his own counsel, set off at daybreak for Saint Joe. There he took passage on a battered, wheezing steamboat bound for the town of Bismarck. The steamer, loaded heavily with bales and crates containing supplies for the Army and the surveying party, finally pushed out into the swift brown Missouri, her nose pointed north.

The river bank was lined with men, and some women, too, who stood in the mud and waved cheering farewells to the departing adventurers. Many of the passengers shot off pistols and shouted boisterous good-bys. Cassidy watched it all with silent fascination, wondering how far they would get aboard this strange craft with its decks almost awash under the weight of freight and passengers.

Cassidy made a bunk for himself among the bales and boxes. Here he could hunch himself down to avoid the bitter whip of the wind and take in the sights in comfort. It was his first trip on a steamer. Travel was certainly getting easier since he had left his home away back in western Massachusetts to become a Union soldier at the tender age of fourteen years—the Union troops had nicknamed him "Stump" Cassidy. He had paddled canoes and poled a raft and a flatboat, but this was real luxurious.

He hoped the steamboat would not sink, for it appeared on the verge of doing just that many times before he reached his destination. It seemed to Stump Cassidy, as the hind-wheeler paddled stubbornly up the river, that the Missouri changed its direction some forty-eleven times before he got to Bismarck. Sometimes they were going north, then suddenly the steamer was pointing west, again eastward and more than once the boat was chugging south. Like some giant writhing rattlesnake down Santa Fe way, Stump thought. Now and then they came to a sprawling town beside the river, and the steamer would creep up to a sagging dock which clung to the bank on wabbling piles. At each of these towns the steamboat lost a few passengers and some of its jumbled freight. Cassidy checked off these towns as he learned their names from the mate of the boat or heard them called out by some passenger familiar with the river. First it was Council Bluffs, then Yanktown, Pierre and Fort Rice, and still they crawled northward.

When the steamboat came within sight of Fort Abraham Lincoln, one of the passengers, a fellow who looked eight feet tall and as narrow as a flagpole, pointed it out. He was leaning on a crate beside Cassidy. "New army post," he grunted. "Callin' it Fort Abe Lincoln. Yuh kin see it clear now, there back under them bluffs."

Cassidy nodded, his keen black eyes discerning the log cabins and stables in neat rows, facing the river and set back from

Then, while the river took the frail raft in its mighty grip and whirled it around like a leaf, Stump Cassidy flung himself like a pit-terrier on the giant outlaw.

the west bank. "They got no dock," he remarked in surprise. "What about the stuff here I see marked for the troops?"

"Goes on up tuh Bismarck," cut in his informant. "Army carts it back from there. Hell, they ain't got nuthin' else t' do, mister."

Cassidy chuckled softly. He guessed maybe the man was right in a way. From his four years service in the recent great war it did seem as if the War Department always did things backward—in spite of which the soldiers had managed to win through to victory.

THIN columns of smoke from the cock-eyed chimneys of sprawling log shacks on the opposite bank of the river caught Cassidy's roving gaze. "What do they call that place, friend?"

"Ha!" crowed the long man. "Some calls it Heaven-on-Earth. Others sez it's known as Hell-'n-High Water. Fact is, them shacks is the dirtiest dives 'tween Bismarck an' ol' Cave in Rock way down the Mississippi. Better steer clear of it, mister, lessen yuh craves to feed yore own carcass to the coyotes."

"Thanks," smiled Stump Cassidy. "I'll remember. But I can't figger it out. Why hang their shacks right here on the bank opposite the fort? Why don't the army do somethin'?"

"Army ain't got no 'thority, mister," growled the tall gent. "An' 'sides them hellions got firewater to sell to such soldiers as wants it bad enough to row across the river fer it."

Cassidy looked back at the place they had passed as they steamed ahead. There was an especial activity aboard the boat. From the looks of the crew and the way the freight was being dragged about they must be nearing Bismarck.

At last the winding river brought him a view of a barren-looking, windswept stretch of prairie. A dock was not far ahead of them, but no town was in siglit. Not until Cassidy's sweeping gaze turned eastward. Far away, perhaps threé or four miles from the river, he could make out the sprawling log buildings of a town, smoke climbing from chimneys. Tiny figures of men afoot, mounted, driving rigs of all types, were streaming from the town toward the dock.

"Bismarck, mister," said the long man. "Missouri's a bad actin' piece o' river, yuh know. They put the town back far enough so's she wouldn't git washed downstream of a night."

"You from here?" asked Stump, picking up his carbine and the blanket pack from the deck at his feet.

"Not me," was the peculiar reply. "I come from Saint Lou."

The groaning steamboat nosed up to the dock and there was a loud clamor of passengers and people from the town hailing each other. A booming blast of the boat's whistle set the harnessed teams on the bank to kicking and squealing. Drivers let loose a volley of vigorous oaths and the crack of whips filled the air.

Stump Cassidy was one of the first to cross the gang-plank and as he moved along through the press of vehicles and men and women, he was aware that there were half a score of trim, cocky soldiers among them. The yellow stripes down the outseam of the sky-blue trousers told him this was the cavalry. On the tilted cap of one Stump saw the number "7" with the crossed sabers.

"Seventh Cavalry," he nodded to himself. Then, like most ex-soldiers, he wondered just who commanded the regiment, perhaps some officer he had known of during the war. "Hey, Corporal," he addressed a non-com. "Who's yore commandin' officer?"

The soldier stuck out his chest and swaggered a step or two He looked Cassidy over critically, noted the powerfully built young man before him in typical frontier buckskin garb.

"To you, mister," said the soldier, "he's Colonel George A. Custer. To the Injuns he's Yellow Hair. Yuh aimin' to enlist?"

Stump shook his head, smiling. "I'm stalkin' a job as hunter with yore outfit when you sashay west with them surveyor gents."

"Better see the colonel, then," suggested the soldier. "Where you hailin' from?"

"Just back from Santa Fe," said Stump. "Things are gettin' fair citified down there now. Where's Colonel Custer at?"

"Find him down river at the post. You can't miss it. There's a gent runs a ferry across from the Devil's Den if yuh got two-bits."

Stump Cassidy thanked the trooper and turned to trail after the other passengers toward the town. Muddy as it was, it felt good to get his moccasined feet on the ground again after those days and nights aboard the steamboat. And no doubt, in Bismarck, he could learn more about the railroad job before he visited the army post.

"Sure is peaceful enough," he admitted half aloud, "don't look like any Injun trouble 'round here, nohow."

BETH SETTON was seventeen and pretty in a brown haired, blue eyed way, even in the faded and patched gingham dress she wore as she stood in the open doorway of the Setton cabin on Moccasin Creek. And Beth was frankly worried, even a little afraid now, though she was determined that her young brother should not see the fear that furrowed her smooth brow. Young Charley, aged seven, whom Beth and her father Jed called Chuck, was poised beside the bank of the creek, motionless, his back to his sister, one small hand cupped over his eyes, Indian fashion, evidently watching something in the brush across the stream. Beth called to him, her blue eyes searching the country as far as she could see, nervously, like a young she-bear on guard over her lone cub.

"Don't get so far away from the cabin, Chuck. What are you doing there, anyway? What do you see?"

The boy turned warily, put a finger to his lips for quiet. Beth's eyes widened in suspense, listening.

Then the boy turned and came swiftly toward her, his bare feet making no sound. "Think I see a deer, Bet," he panted softly. "Git the ol' gun o' Pop's. We kin have it all skinned time Pop gits home."

"Listen!" warned the girl, though there was no sound, even the stirring of a leaf. "You better stay here by the door, Chuck, and keep watching for Pop."

She turned back into the low-walled log hut that burrowed half into the hill slope behind it. The boy, a sturdy, blond haired kid dressed in crude, home-made deerskin shirt and pants, shook his head, resentful of his sister's guardianship. He wanted Pop's gun to take a shot at a deer. And he tiptoed softly off, back to the creek, his eyes squinting, probing the brush. He had a good mind to go and get the old rifle anyway. Then he half turned, paused, his little frame stiffening in sudden terror at what he saw rising from the deep grass beyond the creek. To little Chuck it seemed an hour before he could make a sound, could lift his small voice in a wild cry of warning. Then his voice came, rushed from his throat in a burst of frantic horror.

"Injuns! Injuns, Bet! Run, Bet, run!" He was running as fast as his short legs would carry him for the cabin door. As he ran he screamed repeated warnings to Beth. And the girl, stark terror in her heart, reached the cabin door to see the first of the savages leap to the log which her father had laid across the creek for a foot bridge. Behind the leader came a score or more painted demons, their yells suddenly turning the small, peaceful clearing into a bedlam of war cries.

The girl caught her brother and drew him inside, slamming the heavy oaken door and flinging the bar into its place. For a moment she leaned there, panting, trembling, her eyes staring blankly, her smooth face hot and tingling. Six days ago her father had gone off with his winter's catch to trade at Bismarck. The fear that had gnawed at her heart for two whole days was now a fact. Something *had* happened to Jed Setton, and something—the deadly fear had taken form. Indians! They'd never seen an Indian here. Jed had always said they'd never come down this way. But they were here and their bullets and arrows were thudding into the thick cabin walls.

A fierce surge of courage started Beth from her first faintness. She turned, her small face grim, set, saw little Chuck crouched in a corner of the single room, his face pressed against the logs. "They've snuk up on us, Bet," whispered the boy. "Gonna circle us like, betcha."

"Here," said Beth, snatching her father's old rifle from its pegs on the wall, getting powder and a handful of bullets. "You can help, Chuck. Get some more chunks on that fire so's the hellions can't drop down chimney onto us. We'll show 'em!" She poured a charge of powder into the old muzzle-loader, wishing it was the

newer metallic cartridge weapon which Jed Setton had carried with him. A cold determination seemed to have taken hold of her as she went to a chink in the logs and picked it a little to poke the muzzle of the long gun through. Blam! The first shot! She was sure she had hit one of the fiends for she heard a shrill yell outside. Quickly flinging the gun across the crude log table she loaded again.

LITTLE CHUCK scurried from crack to crack, peering out excitedly. "Gee, Bet, if Pop'd come now he'd run them coyotes tuh their holes!"

Beth did not answer the boy but went from side to side of the now smoke-choked cabin, shooting grimly. Firing and loading, swallowing the lumps which kept crawling up into her throat. A sudden rush of moccasined feet swept toward the cabin. There was a crashing blow on the heavy door. Beth staggered back as if struck, and a smothered cry leapt to her lips. "Oh, dear God!" she breathed. "Save us—save us—save little Chuck!"

The savages were at the walls now. There were too many for her. The knowledge sent a tremor through her whole body. Powder gone, she could do no more, only wait and pray. And the thought of her fate, the fate of the boy, started unbidden tears on her smoke-grimed face.

"Captive!" She spoke the dread word with a clutch at her long brown braids which had fallen loose during the waning moments of her stand. "A woman captive!" She would rather die—die fighting like a Setton should, like Pop would—than fall into the hands of the savages. And she would! She'd go down like a man, let them—make them—kill her for a man!

"Chuck," she cried to the boy. "Be quick!" She snatched up the axe from beside the blazing hearth, drew the boy over to an oak block which served as a stool. She dropped to her knees, her mind made up. "Look, Chuck, do this careful for Beth. Chop my hair off, Chuck! Two hands, boy—careful now."

The boy wide-eyed, wondering, seized the heavy axe in his two small fists and braced his little legs. "What for, Bet?"

"Chop it off, Chuck," ordered the girl, steeling herself as she heard the fierce chopping of the Indians at the logs, the sudden crackle of fire at their cabin wall. The boy let the axe fall then, and chopped and chopped, until the ears of the girl echoed with the thud of axes and her silken locks tumbled to the earthen floor. "Good boy," she gasped, as they heard the splintering of the door planks.

With the hope of desperation Beth Setton then rushed Chuck to a shadowy cabin corner and pressed him down, ordering him to remain silent, to hold his breath, for she was going to cheat the Indians, trick them if she could. Over the boy she carefully piled the heap of firewood. And now, before they broke through, she rushed frantically to the pegs on the opposite wall, dragged down old clothes of her father's. Into these she hurried, flung his old beaver hat on her head. Now they would find a man when they broke in the door, and they'd kill her instantly. It was better to die quickly than to be dragged away to hellish slavery.

"Stay where you be, Chuck," she whispered through the woodpile. "Don't make a sound. Maybe help 'll come yet."

Then she picked up the empty long rifle and swung it across her shoulder. Her two hands gripped the warm barrel for dear life as she edged closer and closer to the trembling cabin door. The first Indian through would get his brains battered on the wall. She had lost all fear now. She stood there, braced, her ears deadened to the din of the savage horde, her blue eyes fixed on the straining door.

STUMP CASSIDY found Bismarck just another rough, tough frontier town. Many of the buildings were quite new—raw boards and false fronts—and almost every other shack was a saloon or a restaurant. Red-faced, bearded, reckless-looking men rolled from one saloon to another, roaring and singing. The town seemed filled with people, and there were dudishly dressed gents with fashionably attired ladies riding in wagons through the muddy streets. Horses lined the hitch-rails and teamsters swore at their charges in voices that should be heard ten miles away.

The smell of cooking drew Cassidy into a tiny place run by a Chinaman named Wong See. Here, by merest chance, Stump

learned news that aroused a new interest, recalling him abruptly from the solitude of his lonely, roving wilderness life, bringing vivid memories of his boyhood on his father's farm back in Massachusetts. A ruddy-faced, blue-eyed man who sat opposite him at the rough plank board, hat tilted back on his curly blond hair, who started it.

"Stranger, eh?" greeted the man with a wholesome friendliness that Cassidy at once liked. "Jest get in, huh?"

"Yes," nodded Stump, grinning, noting the way the other had observed every detail of his garb from moccasins to catskin hat. "Quite a town you got here."

"Railroad 'n' everything, with plenty saloons chucked in," laughed the man. "Be a big city some day. Fine country."

Stump agreed, but remarked that it looked kind of flat and barren. At which the man wiped his mustached mouth with the back of his hand and replied: "Plenty o' room. Plenty. Settlers 'll come in droves. Fact is, we got a good many a'ready."

Stump said he thought it was Indian land, and the man chuckled. "Settlers," he said, "been livin' far out on both sides o' the Missouri, miles away. Injuns never come down here."

"Hell," ejaculated his informant, "Mike Askins been livin' in his soddy out on Big Tree Crick more'n two year. There's Wilson 'n' his woman got a cabin down on the Heart. Never see a varmint. Setton 'n' his family's livin' out on Moccasin Crick. Thinkin' o' pickin' yerself a . . ."

"Setton!" broke in Stump. "You say Setton?" The ruddy man nodded, eying Cassidy. "You wouldn't happen to know this Setton's other name, huh?"

"Jed Setton, I reckon it is, stranger. Name sound familiar?"

"By gol, mister," declared Stump. "I 'member when I was a kid back home in Massachusetts we had a family o' Settons in town. Man was kinda red-headed, tall, long-legged gent an' . . ."

"Same feller, 'r I'm a mud turtle! Red-headed, too!"

Stump's decision was prompt. And when the ruddy faced man told him that Jed Setton had been right there in Bismarck only two days ago on one of his trading trips, Stump wasted no words beyond thanks.

He'd overhaul this Setton if he could. If it was the same Setton he could likely learn something about the folks at home. He had left his home in '61 to join the Army, and here it was '73 and he was still roaming the broad frontier.

"I'll stop over at the army post," he told himself as he set off down river that afternoon.

The Devil's Den was just beginning to light its lamps and candles when Stump Cassidy hove in sight of the sprawling shacks on the river bank. Remembering the advice of the man on the steamboat, Stump halted at the edge of the clustered shacks, looking for some kind of ferry. There was a rickety-looking flat-bottomed punt tied to a stake, but no living soul was in sight.

Stump approached the nearest cabin, over which he made out a crude sign announcing "The Good Samaritan." The smell of the place was strong and mingled with the dampness to fall heavy on Stump's nostrils.

"Hello there," he called, pausing. "Anybody runnin' the ferry?"

For a moment there was no reply, no sign of life, but Stump could hear voices inside, one raised in evident wrath. Then the door was flung open and a tall, heavy-set man appeared, scowling. Stump lifted his rifle hand in a sort of salute, or greeting. The big man in the door lowered his head, peering through the gloom and half light thrown by the lamps inside. He saw the figure in buckskin, saw the deep-tanned face and the black eyes below him, and he let out an oath as he spat directly toward the motionless visitor. "Git to hell gone!" he snarled savagely. "We don't serve no breeds!"

NOW Peter Cassidy—and all of his family—were of a strain that is called "black Irish." Black hair, black, flashing eyes, dark skin. And his life in the out-of-doors, especially those years in the sunny Southwest, had made him darker. But never in all his ramblings had he been called a "breed."

As if he had not heard right, with an air of innocence that belied his real intent, Stump came up the step of the cabin porch,

saying: "Were you speakin' to me, mister?"

The brute in the doorway came out two steps to leave the doorway filled with curious faces, blousy faces, red-eyed, steeped in raw whiskey.

The big fellow started a kick at Cassidy's belt, his heavy boot rising like a sledge weight. "Yuh heard me, yuh—"

Like a double-barreled charge of buckshot Stump Cassidy tore into the big man, every bone and muscle of his prodigiously powerful body flung into an attack that caught the bigger man completely by surprise. One hand smashed at the upflung boot, batting it aside, a crashing punch landed solidly on the man's nose, and in a flash Stump was atop his insulter with a steely left arm whipped around the other's throat, while with free fist and knee he went to work to beat the enemy backward and down. With a heavy thud they landed on the creaking, swaying porch floor, amid a great clamor of shouting and screams from the spectators and a gurgling, sputtering groan from the man who was on the bottom.

SO fast, so furious, and so fierce was Stump's attack that before any of the Good Samaritan gang could interfere, he had battered the brute to a bloody pulp and had sprung to his feet, snatching up his carbine—which, like magic, was cocked and pointed into the crowded doorway.

"Who sculls the ferry yonder?" demanded Stump, belligerently. "Quick now, you scum, or I'll drill the lot of yuh. One of yuh git out here an' row me across, 'r I'll sew yuh all together on a string o' lead!"

"Don't shoot," screamed a lank-haired hag. "Row him, Clegg, row the gentleman across like he says. Quick now!" She pushed a reluctant figure into the gloom. The man came with raised hands, shuffled past Stump, and began running toward the river bank. Stump edged off the porch, picked up his blanket, and backed off warily, noting the slow, painful rising of his recent foe. The man was getting to his knees, stiffly, swearing horribly.

Stump reached the water, got into the bow of the leaky boat, and, warning the trembling rower against any treachery, ordered him to shove out, and hurry. When he was perhaps a hundred yards out on the river the early night was suddenly filled with the rattle of gunfire. Wild shooting made bullets splatter on the water all around him. Cassidy stood up, calling to the frightened oarsman to halt. Those renegades on shore were rotten shots, but Stump had a better target. He sighted his weapon on the lighted doorway and fired. The crash of wood and glass and the shrill scream of a man rocketed out across the water.

"Whoever yuh be, mister," muttered the thoroughly cowed oarsman, "yuh better keep yore eyes skinned be yuh stayin' 'round here. That was Barline himself yuh pummeled. He'd kill yuh soon's look at yuh."

"Thanks," growled Stump. He felt tenderly of his left eye and realized that he had narrowly escaped having it gouged out of his head.

As they neared the opposite shore Stump heard the hurried steps of men coming toward them in the dark, soldiers from the post. Stump heard one of them call out "Who's there? Stay where you are."

"I'm callin' on Colonel Custer," said Stump, "Don't get jumpy, trooper, there's only two of us—and one of us is comin' ashore."

The boat touched the bank, and Stump made out the figures of the troopers covering him with their carbines. He stepped ashore and turned to his reception committee. "Corporal up at Bismarck told me I'd find your long-haired, fightin' colonel here," he said.

"There was shootin'," replied one trooper. "We heard it. Anybody hit?"

"I don't know," laughed Stump. "They started it," he jerked his head across the river, "I only fired one shot to drive 'em to cover."

"Well," said the trooper, "come along with us where we can get a look at you in the light at the guard-house." He came close to Cassidy and sniffed. "You ain't drunk, are yuh?"

"And I'm not carryin' any jug," chuckled Stump, "if that's what you lads are hopin'."

The cavalrymen laughed. They escorted Cassidy to the guard-house where the sergeant was discovered talking excitedly in sign and word with a Cree Indian scout. Stump, who knew much of the red

man's language, raised his dark eyebrows in quick concern. He knew before the non-com relayed the news to his troopers that there was fighting ahead. The Sioux, a fair-sized band, had been seen a dozen miles west of the military reservation, traveling south. And they were in full war regalia.

COLONEL CUSTER, the dashing cavalry leader, was glad to see Cassidy, and assured him that there was undoubtedly a place for him with the surveying party as hunter. The expedition, however, was not to get into the field for possibly three weeks.

"We'll find a bunk for you, Cassidy," said Custer. "You can get acquainted with the outfit. Glad to have you."

But Stump had other plans. He told the colonel about the Settons and his desire to locate their cabin. Custer, in turn, warned Stump that there was report of Sioux, small parties, perhaps, roving the wild region westward. They might even be in the vicinity of Moccasin Creek.

"Then I must get there," declared Stump. "If this Setton is really the man we knew back home in Massachusetts, I may be able to warn him in time, give him a hand. They tell me he's got his family there."

"I don't know," admitted Colonel Custer. "But if you're determined to hunt him up, I can tell you how. On the military map Moccasin Creek is almost due west from this post. Watch out for twin buttes."

Stump Cassidy left Fort Abe Lincoln making westward at dawn next morning. At the same time a detail of the Seventh Cavalry was forming to ride south in search of the reported Sioux. A bunch of troopers wished Cassidy luck, and, as they saw him break into a smooth running stride, they called after him.

"Take it easy there, Cassidy," they yelled. "You got a long way to go."

Stump waved over his shoulder, a grin on his face, but his moccasined feet did not waver in their stride. Stump could run for many a mile at just that pace. Behind him, as he crossed the first gentle slope and went down, shortening his stride, he could hear the bugle at the post blowing Stables. Then the wind changed and there was no more sound, only the fall of his feet and the crunch of new grass, the flutter of an occasional bird. Settling into a rhythmic, tireless pace, Stump gave his whole attention now to watching ahead and along the horizon on either side. If there were Sioux playing around he was not going to run into them if he could help it.

By nightfall he judged he must have covered some thirty miles, between running and walking. But he was not tired, and had he known the country better he would have gone on a few more miles in the dark. As it was he found a deep ravine at the edge of a vast chain of wooded hills. Here, in the shelter of a rocky ledge, he built a fire and cooked bacon to eat with a mess of corn-bread.

"An' now," he muttered to himself," I'll roll up by the fire in m' blanket an' wake up with m' hair gone." There was a grim smile on his flame-lighted features, for Stump had known of things like that along the California and the Santa Fe trails. White men butchered in their sleep.

For some moments he stood listening to the night sounds in the forest above him, the trickle of the brook where he had drunk cool, sparkling water. Then he moved away from the fire and crept cautiously to where a big tree had fallen. Protected by the thick trunk, he lay down and rolled in his blanket, his carbine between his legs, the butt close to his chin, as he had learned to do in the Army. It was ready at hand, but could not be fired accidentally and blow his head off. As he dropped off to sleep Stump tried to remember what Jed Setton's family looked like. All he could remember from his childhood was a small child, a little girl. She'd be quite a young lady now, Stump decided.

Stump knew what woke him, knew why he did not leap up quickly. It was plain frontier instinct. He heard the sound of sniffing, first softly, then louder, moving, like the sniffing of a big hungry bear.

"But it ain't a bear," Stump said to himself, opening his eyes alertly, lying motionless, for there was no padding of long-clawed paws. He turned his head carefully for a glance toward where he had left his cook-fire, and his right hand slid from under the blanket gripping the carbine

close to the trigger. The fire was now only glowing embers, but it made enough light to outline the dark, low-crouched figure of an Indian. Stump could make out two feathers spiked in his hair and in an outstretched, reaching hand was gripped a hatchet, the white man's hatchet that was replacing the aboriginal tomahawk among the tribes.

Stump saw in that swift glance that it was only a half dozen more strides before the savage would be atop him. To move now would bring the hatchet thrown like a bullet. He dared not lift his carbine to swing it to bear. He had one chance, a lone gambler's wild deuce.

THROUGH his teeth, Stump whistled suddenly, softly. The sound lifting from the ground with the giant tree trunk as a sounding board, froze the redskin in his tracks, and for the space of a man's quick breath, he twisted his head, confused. In that instant Stump's carbine spat flame and lead. The muzzle, only a few barrel lengths from the red man's belly, blasted him into eternity with its thundering boom.

On his feet like a cat, Stump Cassidy leaped for the thickness of the nearby brush, waited, listening. Perhaps there were others, friends of this prowling buck. There were prickles running up the back of his neck, and he was mad. Mad at himself for his carelessness.

"Funny, too," mused Stump, creeping forth warily, "one buck all alone. The Injun may have been a messenger between bands, perhaps a lone hunter. . . ." But Stump found no weapons other than the hatchet and a hunting knife. He was a little worried, not entirely for himself, but for the Settons. "If the damn redskins are on the loose—" He shook his head. He'd stay clear of the woods, keep to the open. It was only a stone's throw to the mouth of the ravine, and he came out onto the rolling prairie watchful, searching westward for Indians and for a glimpse of the twin buttes Colonel Custer had mentioned.

It was still too dark. He set his direction by the stars and began walking swiftly, glancing backward across his shoulder every now and then

When the sun came up he was far from the spot where he had left the dead Indian, and by mid-morning he was startled by the sudden appearance of two towering red buttes raised against the western sky. Then he knew he was right. Moccasin Creek could not be far.

Fringes of trees and clumps of wood soon began to appear on his left and he knew it must be a watercourse. The Moccasin! He halted on the crest of a ridge, and crouched low, alert, for he had run into pony tracks. Looked like thirty or forty. Unshod. Indian mounts. Stump read the sign and knew the Indians had passed that way only yesterday, and, from the tracks, the riders had been pushing their ponies hard.

"Guess I bought into a game o' cut-throat," he said grimly as he hurried on more warily. And so cautiously did he continue his march that the faint smell of tobacco smoke made him drop flat as he was climbing a rocky hillside. Finger on trigger, he searched the area carefully, felt the soft west wind, crept belly-flat to the edge of a ragged crevice and peered down. A thin wavering string of tobacco smoke came from below him, the smoker masked by brush. As Stump clung there, motionless, he heard the low, halting groan of a man.

Stump's moccasined feet made no sound as he began a cautious descent. Half way down he saw the heavy, worn boots and slashed leg of a white man's jean pants and part of a bloody, bare leg. In a flash Stump was hunkered down under the brush in the narrow cleft facing the man, who was sprawled flat, one shoulder braced against a rock. The man stared at him, half seeing. The pipe in his mouth bobbed with each mechanical puff, and the sound that came from the hairy lips was like the bite of a saw into rotten wood. The man's red-bearded face was a clotted mass of blood, and he lay in a dirty, muddy puddle of the same color.

"Jed Setton!" whispered Stump Cassidy, chilled to the marrow at the sight of the man he had been seeking. "You know me, Mister Setton? I'm young Peter Cassidy —Cassidy." He reached out a hand to touch the shaft of the arrow which protruded from Setton's chest. Setton's eyes wavered. He nodded wearily. The pipe slipped from his teeth and he said, "Pete . . . tell . . . the . . . kids."

Stump lifted Setton gently, saw the head

of the arrow sticking out below his shoulder blade, where Jed had been struggling to pull it out. He got out his knife and cut the barbed head off. Then he jerked the shaft from the man's body, quickly shoving into both wounds small patches he slashed from his blanket. Setton slumped down like a dead man. Stump gathered him up as gently as possible, got him across his shoulder, picked up his carbine, and struggled up the side of the rock crevice with his burden.

"Now," muttered the bewildered Stump, "if I can find his cabin and get him to it, mebbe—mebbe we can pull him through."

With the man hanging dead weight on his back, Stump Cassidy fixed his eyes on the twin buttes and set off. It was all plain to Stump now. Those pony tracks. Jed Setton had run into the band after sundown and had made a running fight of it. In daylight the varmints'd never have let him get away alive.

As he plodded on, Stump recalled the only words Setton had spoken. Kids. Must be more than one then.. Hell of a thing if he couldn't find the cabin.

TO make sure of his goal, Cassidy kept one eye on the brush-lined course of the creek, which he was sure must be the Moccasin. After what seemed a dozen miles of walking and resting. Stump made out the smoking logs of a cabin set half into a hillside. The sight of the smoldering cabin brought despair into Stump's grim face. He called out as he came near but got no reply.

"Too late," he growled deep in his throat, as he placed the limp form in the shelter of some brush. Then he walked to the cabin, saw that only one corner of it had really burned. The green logs had baffled the flames. Stepping gingerly through the charred doorway, he surveyed the shambles that had been a settler's home. "Carried off the kids, I betcha," he said bitterly. "His wife, too, mebbe. Don't see no blood aroun'."

Then he heard a plaintive half-crying, half-sniffling sob that jerked him alert. His black eyes probed the smoke-tinged gloom, and he moved across the single room toward the heap of firewood in the corner. A small, timid voice came from the woodpile. Stump stared, unbelieving.

"Injuns tooken Bet. Yuh there, Pop?"

Stump began pulling the wood away, revealing a small, blond boy whose face was streaked with tears and dirt who eyed his buckskin-clad rescuer grimly. "Yuh seen my Pop, mister?" he asked.

"Shore," replied Stump, lifting the boy out and carrying him to the door, almost stumbling over a broken long-barreled muzzle-loader. "Yore Pop's been hurt pretty bad, boy," explained Stump. "Pretty bad. Tell me, lad, what happened when the Injuns come?"

The boy, assured by the kindliness of his new friend, told him that his name was Charley Setton and that he and his sister Beth had fought to the last. How Beth had tried to make herself look like a man.

". . . Bet fought like one too, when the Injuns broke in. Only they saw she was a girl, an' they tore Pop's old coat off her, yelling like all get out. Then they took Bet and went away makin' an awful racket. They was all painted like crazy. . . ."

"What about yore ma?" asked Stump hopefully.

"We ain't got no ma," said little Chuck. "She's been dead a long time."

Stump took the boy over to the brush and sat him beside his father, explaining that he was badly wounded and must lie quietly. He then got some water for the boy and forced a few drops between Jed Setton's parched lips. The boy was no longer sniveling. "I'll watch him," he offered. "Flies is bad around."

Stump nodded. He told the boy to stay with his father and keep out of sight if any more Indians appeared. If the boy would do that he would try to find the trail of the Indians who had carried off his sister.

There was little hope for Jed Setton. Stump knew it. But he could do nothing without help. If the cavalry was only nearer—but they were not. It was up to Cassidy. "Hide right here, Charley," he said to the child. "Take care o' yore Pop. I'm goin' to find yore sister an' mebbe we can get some help." Stump waved to the boy, began circling wide around the cabin, reading sign, and finally cut across a hill and into the woods, out of sight.

Colonel Custer pulled up his mount to a halt as his ears caught the distant sound

of gunfire. Another burst of shots came clearer, sharper. The troopers drew up nearer, and their long-haired daredevil leader said coolly, "Fight, all right." There was a hint of a smile on his face and an eagerness that was reflected in the hardened faces of his troopers who sat for the moment, listening, checking their weapons.

"We'll deploy," said Custer, settling his broad-brimmed hat firmly on his head. "Come on boys, let's get in it before it's over." He dug spurs into his thoroughbred mount and led the racing troop across the rolling prairie toward a gap in the wooded fringe of hills.

The troop was spread out, with intervals between the men, and while they rode the sound of rifle fire came sharper to their ears, rising above the thundering rush of their horses. One of the troopers, as the party neared the gap, shouted, pointing at the ground: "There's their trail, Colonel. Figger it's the same bunch we been huntin'."

The trail led straight through the gap, and the troop swept on, spread wide for the gunfire was far ahead of them. Into a broad, new green valley they dashed, and far away in the distance, against the sloping edge of a thick woods, they could now make out the hazy drift of gunsmoke, and the dull, gray-blue puff balls rising skyward.

CUSTER'S arm shot out in a signal as he drew his revolver, and the line of blue-clad soldiers behind him began to widen, stretching out into a great arc, carbines ready. They were near enough now to make out an Indian here and there, crawling behind rocks and trees. Most of the band was hidden in the edge of the forest.

A wild yell, the challenge of the savages, rose at sight of the soldiers, and the troopers returned it heartily. Custer's clear voice barked the awaited command: "Dismount and fight on foot!" With smooth precision the men slid from horses, every fourth trooper grabbing the bridle reins of his comrades' mounts. The horses were rushed back out of the line of fire, and with a fierce shout the cavalrymen swept into the battle, firing at will, knocking redskins from their perches, driving them from cover into the open. Suddenly one of the troopers yelled and pointed. "It's that Cassidy lad. Hey, Cassidy!"

Stump Cassidy waved and yelled from his jagged rocky, natural fortress. "Hey, Colonel!" he cried. "Look out there, there's a girl in there. A white girl!"

Custer's fighting blue eyes were grim slits. He nodded, stood up recklessly, daring the redskin fire, and called to his men to close in. Stump Cassidy leaped down from his fortress, hot carbine smoking, and ran like a deer after the yellow-haired soldier. "White men in the woods, too, Colonel," he yelled above the crackle of rifle fire. "They're—"

"Prisoners?" demanded Custer, pausing, crouched. "You mean—"

"No," roared Stump. "Looked to me like they were runnin' things."

Custer's eyes blazed. He dropped to the ground and raised his field glasses, probing the shadowy woods. Then he nodded. "Some of those whiskey peddlers, I'll wager," he fumed. "Hope we can get our hands on them."

The cavalrymen were tightening the wide jaws of their man-trap. At a shout from their colonel the men rose and rushed forward firing alternately, carbines spitting flame and lead that brought the death song to a score of red men, and in a flash there was a fierce hand-to-hand fight in progress. Into the woods it swept, red man against white. Stump Cassidy, who dropped his carbine as he entered the forest, whipped his hatchet from his belt and leaped for the first savage he could reach. His death hand rose and fell like the crack of doom. Then, through the forest he saw scurrying figures. One was the half-clad form of a girl—a white girl. With the snarl of a wolf, he sprang toward her, saw her fight stubbornly to break free of a man's grip on her wrist. It was a white man. Stump threw his hatchet with sure aim, heard it strike, and caught the girl in his buckskin arms as she fell free. All about him were soldiers, finishing the job on dying savages or prodding their prisoners toward the edge of the wood. He heard Colonel Custer's voice as the din subsided.

"What happened to that fellow Cassidy?" called Custer.

Stump appeared leading the partly dazed girl, who seemed more ashamed than

frightened as she strove to cover her nakedness with the blanket she clutched about her. The sight of the soldiers brought a deep red tinge to her face beneath the grime of dirt and tears. "I'm shore thankful, Colonel," grinned Stump. "Bit off a heap more'n I could chew. This girl's Jed Setton's daughter—I think. Ain't you, Miss?" He turned to her anxiously.

"Yes," replied the girl, eyeing the dashing Custer. "I'm Beth Setton." She burst suddenly into tears so that Cassidy could only guess what she tried to say about her father and little brother.

Stump told Custer what he had found and how he had trailed the Indians; how he had discovered them in camp with several evil-looking white men. Custer nodded gravely, motioned for a trooper to bring up the two white men they had taken prisoner. One of these, a long-faced dull-witted man who was the least drunk of the pair, seemed glad to divulge the facts. Beth Setton hung her head in shame as the fellow told how Barline's gang had come up with the Sioux and Barline had bought the girl from the Indians for two jugs of whiskey. Barline had dealt with these same savages before. He was going to use the girl in his tavern, the fellow said.

"You mean," cut in Stump, "this Barline bought her like you'd buy a horse 'r a cow, 'thout the girl havin' a thing to say?"

The man flinched, drew back from Cassidy, "I didn't have nothin' to do with it, mister," he whined. "Fact is, I was agin it. But Barline wanted her bad."

"And where is this man Barline?" demanded Custer.

"Musta escaped," declared a non-commissioned officer. "Some of them got away into the woods when the fight started, sir."

"Yeah," now put in the second prisoner. "Barline scooted."

"I'll catch up with him," announced Stump, his black eyes glittering. "An' when I do—well—" He turned to Custer. "If you can let me have a small escort, sir," he fell into military custom unconsciously, "I could return to the Setton cabin. There's the boy an' his pop."

Colonel Custer spoke to his troop bugler and the soldier moved down the slope, put the bugle to his lips. The rocketing blast of brass crashed on the hillside and along the fringe of the woods. It was not long before a field ambulance was seen coming on the dead run through the distant gap, accompanied by a mounted escort.

With cool efficiency Custer assigned men to accompany Cassidy, a guard to march the prisoners back to the fort, and he himself led the rest of his men in pursuit of the escaped Barline and his redskin friends.

Stump Cassidy with Beth Setton and the soldiers reached the cabin to find little Charley keeping a tearful vigil over the stiffened body of his father. Jed Setton was dead.

BY the time a grave had been dug beside the ruined cabin and Jed Setton buried with simple rites it was almost sunset, and Stump, eager as he was to see Beth and her little brother safe at Fort Abe Lincoln, agreed with Sergeant Pierce that they had best camp there for the night.

"Be safer," declared the sergeant. "A hoss carryin' double an' all might step in a dog hole an' break a leg."

"If I had something to cook," murmured Beth, "I could fix you men up something to eat, but—"

Stump smiled at the girl, admiring her pluck and the way she was taking her tragedy. "I'll rustle some meat," he offered, and picked up his carbine with a word to Sergeant Pierce. The girl watched him tramp away toward the woods, her blue eyes following his smooth stride appraisingly. He was such a powerful figure of a man. What he had told her, on their way to the cabin after the rescue fight, had awakened a vague stirring inside of her. He was one of her own people, had been a boy in the same settlement where she had been born. And here they were, a man and woman—and she owed him her very life. The thought made her glad, glad in the midst of her sorrows. It was Peter Cassidy who had come to her from home, come in the nick of time to save her, and little Chuck, from a dread frontier fate.

Cassidy's carbine was heard and the troopers listened, tense. Beth Setton felt a strange new anxiety. She turned from the new fire the men had built, watching

the dark woods. Then came another shot, and—to the girl—an interminable period of waiting. The soft crunch of moccasined feet marked Stump's approach, and into the light of the fire marched Cassidy, carrying two enormous turkeys.

These were soon roasting on sticks propped above the flames, and the party ate hungrily, with few words spoken except among the troopers, who asked Stump how he could just walk into the woods at night and shoot turkeys.

"Easy, fellers," grinned Stump. "They mostly roost in the branches along the edge of the woods. Yuh just pick out a star and begin movin' around sightin' her through the branches. When the star disappears it's the branch 'r a turk blottin' it out. Yuh move around soft-like an' measure the blot; if it's a nice big round blot, yuh shoot."

The sergeant chuckled softly; "Yore a kinda one-man regiment an' commissary all in one, Cassidy," he remarked. "Why'n't yuh join the Army?"

"Had four years of it with the 6th Massachusetts Volunteers," said Stump. "I don't cotton to soldierin' in peace time."

"Peace times," growled a trooper. "Call Injun fightin' peaceful?"

The sergeant appointed a guard for the night, and the silent dark drew thickly over them. In the morning they set out for the fort which they didn't reach until the regiment was forming for Retreat. It was a thrilling sight for Chuck who was riding with Sergeant Pierce as the little party halted on the distant hill. Lines of mounted soldiers marched down the parade to the tingling strains of Colonel Custer's favorite band music, "Garryowen." They saw the regiment swing, troop on troop, and even Stump, at that distance, could recoghize the distinguished figure of the dashing commander, standing with his staff, in his almost pure white, fringed buckskin jacket and the light sombrero to match.

The troopers came to stiff attention, Pierce saluting, as the bugle sounded Retreat and they watched the Stars and Stripes smoothly hauled down. Putting their horses to an easy lope, they rode into the post where Custer, observing their approach, awaited them with a frank and rather boyish anxiety.

Pierce reported with a salute and the colonel walked up to the sergeant's side where he could take hold of little Chuck's grimy fist. "Hello, young fellow," he greeted the wide-eyed child. "Pretty short for a cavalryman, aren't you? You must be pretty hungry."

"We'll take good care of him an' his sister, sir," said Pierce quickly. "My wife'll be glad of some company."

"Fine, fine," nodded Custer. "I'm sure we can make every one comfortable. Mrs. Custer is deeply concerned, Miss Setton." He turned toward the girl. "You'll need some clothing, my dear child."

"I'm obliged to you, sir," Beth managed to say, embarrassed. "Mister Cassidy's going to fetch me some goods from Bismarck." She glanced shyly sidewise at Stump who was holding her before him on the horse.

"Oh," smiled the colonel. "Well, I'm sure Mister Cassidy will fetch anything he goes after." He looked at Stump. "And what are your plans, Peter Cassidy?"

STUMP'S black eyes fixed themselves like a double-barreled gun on the face of the cavalry officer. His expression was grave. "Did you ketch that Barline varmint, Colonel?" he asked, instead of answering Custer's query directly.

It was Custer's turn to frown. He shook his leonine mane and said to the man on the horse, "We got a half dozen of the Indians, but Barline slipped through our net. I've been told that some one crossed the river before dawn this morning. It may have been Barline. I propose to send word to the marshal at Bismarck and have him arrested by the proper authorities. It's a federal offense you know; he sells whiskey to the Indians and stirs up the young bucks. The man is the worst character in the territory. Why do you ask, Cassidy?"

"Because," declared Stump coldly, "Mister Barline is the only plan I had in mind. If you'd taken him, I wouldn't've had anything to do. But while he's loose, I'm after him. I'm crossin' the river in the mornin'."

As an army officer Colonel Custer knew that he had no authority over either Cassidy or the outlaw, Barline, beyond what either or both might do while on the mili-

tary reservation. Cassidy, of course, was free to go where he liked. Barline, the leader of the renegade bunch who made their headquarters at the Devil's Den across the river, had more than once dared the territorial law to come within rifle range of his den.

Stump, some better for a shave and a good scrubbing, lay full length on a bunk in the long log barracks enjoying the warmth of the red hot stove and listening to the chatter of the troopers who cleaned weapons, oiled boots, and smoked. His talk with Colonel Custer was uppermost in his mind in his contemplation of the man Barline. What to do? The army officer was concerned, it seemed, only with the arrest and imprisonment of a hellion who was furnishing whiskey to Indians. On the other hand, Stump craved to destroy the man, to tear him limb from body, not for his lawless whiskey trade but for his bestial plan to enslave Beth Setton. The poor girl would have been better off had she been carried away north by the Sioux and forced into marriage with some Indian. But he, Stump Cassidy, had saved her from the savages and from the outlaw Barline as well. She was now his responsibility. The sudden realization of this fact brought a frown to Cassidy's dark eyes as he watched the glowing stove.

"She is my responsibility," he muttered under his breath. And in that acknowledgment he knew that he had suddenly ceased to be just a foot-loose young Yankee with the whole western frontier for his stamping ground. He must do something about Beth and her brother. He'd have to take them safely back East to relatives, perhaps, or find a place in Bismarck. . . .

His thoughts, as well as the desultory conversation in the barracks, were interrupted by a new sound outside. It was the clear musical whistling of some one approaching. The song the man whistled was "The Girl I Left Behind Me" and he was whistling in a stirring march time, evidently stepping along to his measured beat. Stump, with the others, turned eyes toward the door, and it opened to admit —to Stump's amazement—a full-blooded Indian, who slammed the door, let a shrill blasting whistle finish his march, and stared around the long room with a broad grin on his bronzed face.

The Indian was dressed from head to toe in his native garb except that he wore a regulation cavalryman's blouse, or jacket, and his two head feathers, instead of being bound into his braided hair, were fastened to the crown of a dirty sombrero.

The nearest trooper, Dan Cahill, lifted a hand in mock salute, and said: "How, Walking Wolf!"

WALKING WOLF bared his big yellow teeth in a grin, peering around the shadowy room as if searching for some one, then said, to Cassidy's surprise, "How yoreself, horse killer!" The troopers laughed heartily.

For a moment or two there was no more said as the now silent Indian walked to the stove, picked a place on the floor, and sat himself down. The soldiers watched him patiently as he drew forth a short pipe and a handsomely beaded pouch. Absorbed, he filled and lighted the pipe, drew a few deep puffs and let the smoke drift lazily upward, his slightly slanted, black eyes, deep-set, shifting, traveling from face to face until they came to rest on the lone visitor in the bunk. Stump stared back at him.

"What's on yore mind, scout?" demanded Dan Cahill at last. "Who the hell invited you here anyway?"

"I invite myself," snapped Walking Wolf. "I bring good news." He puffed his pipe and blew a series of perfect smoke rings, then, glancing sidewise toward where Stump lay watching, he added, "I come 'cross river tonight. I hear pow-wow at Devil Den. Barline is make big medicine, lotta white man, heap fire-water." He laughed softly. "Barline goin' kill man name Cassidy." Walking Wolf raised a long brown finger, drew it across his throat, and made a gurgling sound. It was the death sign of the Sioux, and as a Cree army scout, Walking Wolf knew the gesture well.

Stump swung up and sat on the edge of the bunk as the troopers turned their gaze toward him. "Who told you that, Walking Wolf?"

The red man shook his head. "Nobody tell." He put his finger to his eyes, then to his ears. "I see and I hear."

"Aw, rats," growled Cahill. "Enough o' this heathen stuff. Tell us what's what."

The Cree chuckled and between puffs at his pipe told Cassidy and the soldiers how he had come down river and was attracted by the sounds of drunken shouting. He had crept to the side wall of the Barline shack and peered through a window where he could see and hear everything. Barline, said the Cree, was fixing to watch for Cassidy when he left Fort Abe Lincoln and fall on him with his outlaw gang.

"Barline, he goin' cut your heart out," said Walking Wolf with customary Indian gestures which the scout emphasized by whipping out a long, bright knife from beneath his coat and going through the motion of digging his own heart from his breast.

Cassidy stepped from the bunk and flexed his muscular body like a cat as it rises from slumber. He looked at the Cree, a crooked smile about his lips. "I'm obliged to you, Walking Wolf. Looks like I've gotta change my plans."

From inside his snug-fitting buckskin breeches, Stump drew a short, ugly-looking, double-barreled derringer. He broke this open and glanced through the smooth barrels toward the hanging lamp. Then he reached to his half-empty cartridge belt on the bunk and extracted two .44-caliber cartridges which he slipped into the tiny weapon. There was a warm, cozy silence in the barracks as the soldiers watched their guest. Finally, as Stump checked his ammunition, one of the cavalrymen said; "That's kind of a lady's weapon, ain't it, Cassidy?"

Stump grinned and their was something fiendish about the light in his black eyes. "Takes same bullet the carbine shoots. Makes a hole in a man's belly yuh could stick yore head in. Mighty handy tool in a tight."

Walking Wolf's eyes glittered and he looked at Stump Cassidy with frank approval, his free hand moving subconsciously to the pit of his stomach. He growled deep in his chest.

"Where yuh goin', partner?" inquired Cahill, rising quickly. "Yuh ain't goin' over there now—tonight?"

"I'm not waitin'," chuckled Stump. "Barline's medicine's made. I got a few pills he's not figgerin' on. Shore I'm goin' —now!"

NO man trusted Big Barline. Most men feared him, that is, most men of his ilk, the riff-raff of the river and the petty crooks from the country eastward who drifted to the nest of hovels known as the Devils' Den and there found temporary refuge from the law. Big Barline had won his place as ruler of the roost more than a year before when he had, by reason of his size and strength, as well as his sudden knife point, driven the original outlaw chieftain off like a cur with his tail between his legs.

"I'm boss o' the upper Mizzou," the giant Barline had shouted on that occasion and it was his favorite pronouncement whenever an audience was at hand.

Tonight was one of those times. There were lamps lighted in other shacks, but the Good Samaritan—a name which Barline himself had laughingly painted on his headquarters and saloon—was aglow with sputtering light that gave the dive a cheerful, inviting touch. From the river, or from the opposite shore and the army post, the friendly warmth seemed to reach out and to beckon the thirsty pilgrim on this night in early spring.

Barline sat like a big trained bear on a high bench at the end of his bar. He was in a strange wavering mood—one moment in the highest of spirits, the next sunk deep in brooding over the wrongs men had done him. There were perhaps a score of men in the place. And there were women. Six of them, drab, slatternly creatures with faded hair and yellowed skin that was daubed in crude attempt to offset the deadly pallor shed by the smoking lamps and the layers of vile tobacco smoke that piled up, strata upon strata, from the bar top to the cob-webbed rafters.

Barline watched the crowd and sucked frequently from a bottle at his elbow. Tonight—yes, for the past twenty-four hours—he could think of nothing else but the stranger who had bested him. "Not once, but twice in less 'n three days, this dirty, little foul-fightin' skunk has made me chaw dust," Barline muttered to himself and spat savagely on the splintery floor of the shack. "An' I paid them stinkin' Injuns two full jugs o' whiskey for the gal. She's a prime young female, too, and but for this sneakin' little snake she'd be workin' fer me here right now!"

He picked up the bottle and tilted it high, pouring the liquid dynamite down his throat in his temper, after which he flipped the empty bottle over his shoulder to crash on the floor in a corner.

"I'm boss o' the upper Mizzou!" he bellowed with such vigor that the crowd fell back, hushed. "Yuh hear me, gents —'n' ladies—when I git to lay me hands on that little skunk I'm cuttin' off his head an' hangin' it by the ears offa the roof as warnin' to ev'y man along the river."

Barline's piercing eyes gleamed a challenge to his audience. No man moved.

"Yuh'll be org'nized by sun-up, every son of yuh, yuh hear me? Pay attention to Big Barline. The feller thet calls hisself Cassidy is on that damn reservation over thar an' the minute he steps foot this side o' the river, he's mine."

One of the men nearest Barline nodded his small head and cried out drunkenly, "What yuh say goes, boss! We're all with yuh, ain't we, boys?" Hoarse, drunken voices cheered their beaming chief.

One of the women yelled in a faltering, throaty voice: "Three cheers fer Big Barline! He's a good sport!"

Barline reached out with his long leg and gave the woman a shove with his toe in the softer portion of her anatomy nearest him. The woman screamed shrilly in mock agony and fell sprawling amid the shuffling feet of the crowd.

"Fill up their glasses, Mick," shouted Barline heavily. "I'm treatin' again, gents. Line up an' put it down. An' remember what I tell yuh, I want this Cassidy feller took alive. No shootin' an' no cuttin' on him. I'm skinnin' him m'self an' I'll nail his hide on the side o' the house in the sun." He bit his words out venomously, sending a chill up the spines of his listeners. Barline was the man to do such a thing. He had the knack of it.

They were too busy downing the fiery whiskey to observe Barline's face as he felt of his left ear. Cassidy had curled it up like a fat, brown caterpillar with a punch in the fight on the porch. The ear still stung, and it reminded Barline of the lightning-like attack of the man he was aiming to murder in cold blood.

With sunrise in the morning, as he had planned, his outlaw clan would spread a watchful cordon reaching north along the river to Bismarck, and south far down toward old Fort Rice. Cassidy would never be able to get through it alive. He'd walk like a fool young cub into the trap, like a smart young fly into the hairy spider's web.

BARLINE leaned his big head on a hand half dozing in pleased anticipation of revenge. The smoky room was warm, and the outlaw boss closed his puffed lids, shifting his seat to rest both elbows on the bar. At that moment, one of his henchmen happened to glance through a window that faced the river. The man turned with a strange, puzzled look on his face, his red eyes wide.

"Hey, boss! Hey, Barline! Look!" He pointed out the window, and the crowd pushed nearer to see. "There's a fire burning out there! A fire!"

One snatched open the flimsy door, and Big Barline snapped open his eyes, slipping from his bench with an oath. "What's the fire for—an' who made it?"

He pushed through the mob at the door and rushed onto the sagging porch. The others—those able to stagger—crowded after him. Barline halted there, swaying, his evil face lighted up by the reflection of the rising flames of a fire that blazed within a hundred feet of his door.

No one stood by the fire. There was no sign of a man. There was no sound but the rising crackle of flames. It was eerie. Suspicion followed mystery in the puzzled minds of Barline's gang. What did it mean? A fire and no one in sight.

Suddenly, fear of the thing he could not understand choked Barline, and he cried hoarsely, "To hell with it! Git inside —all o' yuh!"

And he was one of the first to plunge back into the foul-smelling room, a chill sweat on his brow, eyes furtive as those of a wolf at bay. They were wedged there, a squirming, grunting mass of men and women when a voice halted them. A sudden voice. It came at them like the crack of a bull-skinner's whiplash.

"Stand still, all o' yuh. First man moves, I'll blow Barline's head off!"

There was a window open far back in the room, near the end of the bar. By the bar stood a grim, half-crouched figure, braced against the wall. It was the man Cassidy. In his hands rested a carbine, its

menacing muzzle aimed at Barline's throat.

Barline's sticky lips parted and he sucked in, gasping—hatred, fear smoldering in his eyes. "What yuh want here?" he croaked.

"You," snarled Stump, motionless. "I want you!"

Barline stood like a man carved from solid rock. The sputtering light from the two lamps shed a murky yellow light on the weird tableau. For an instant there was no sound, only hoarse breathing. Then Barline found his thickened tongue and said, "Yuh damn fool, y'ain't got a chance. My boys'll make dawg meat outa yuh!"

Stump Cassidy grinned viciously at the speaker. "Why yuh no-good grizzly pup, Barline," said Stump, "yo're lower than a weasel. Yo're a cheap four-flusher an' yuh know it. I come here to give yuh a chance yuh don't deserve. Could have killed yuh through the window, but that ain't white man style. You stand still," as Barline shifted uneasily, "an' every man in the room drops his weapons when I count three. I'll settle yore hash, Mister."

Cassidy's quick eyes caught a furtive movement back of Barline and his carbine raised an inch. Then came a voice. A man half hidden in the crowd called out threatening, "Don't be a sucker, stranger. I got a gun in m' hand this minute an' I'm blowin' the lamps to hell with yore first move."

Shifting his eyes momentarily from Barline, Stump probed the faces, hunting the man he hoped was bluffing. And in that fleeting instant, as his black, piercing eyes left Barline's huge frame, the Good Samaritan was turned into an inferno. Barline, quick as a cat to accept a chance for his life, hurled his knife like a screaming arrow straight for Cassidy, and as he threw a pistol thundered. Some one flung a heavy glass. The two lamps exploded in a thousand bits and flaming oil was dashed floorward. Stump felt the burning slash of the knife as it drove through his right arm and nailed him to the board wall. The room went black, then sprang alive in flame and guns barked like a loosed wolf pack. Men stampeded, trampling their mates and the women, too, through the door, some through the windows.

The flaming oil blazed up through black smoke and the fumes of gunpowder, while Cassidy fought fiercely to keep his carbine going and to pull himself free from the wall where he was pinned. He heard Barline's voice. "Git in thar," bellowed the outlaw chief. "Surround him an' cut him down! Beat him to death!"

DEVIL'S DEN was a flaming hell. Stump's carbine fell now from his numbed right hand and with a desperate effort he managed to jerk Barline's knife from the wall. His warm blood trickled down his arm from just under the shoulder, and he was cursing himself for a fool, as he dropped to his knees, groping in the thick fumes for the carbine. And lucky he was, for he fell to his knees as a gun barrel was poked through the very window where he had himself entered to surprise the outlaws. Stump felt the shock of the explosion, the hotter blast of black powder fumes as the bullet screamed over his head.

On hands and knees, he paused, listening, the din of the swift-crawling fire almost drowning the rush of feet as the last of the outlaw gang fled from the doomed shack. Barline was on the porch, he was sure, for he made out his voice through the bedlam, shouting frenzied orders. If he could reach Barline, get within sight of him just once, he could die happy.

Stump had the little derringer in his left hand now and he began crawling along the floor, not daring to raise his head lest someone pot him from a window. Over the hot splintery floor he felt his way toward where he knew the door to be. Broken glass cut his hands and knees. He got within his own length of the door before instinct told him that he would be an easy target for a dozen guns if he crawled out.

"Well, here she goes," muttered Stump, getting his feet under himself, and bracing for the desperate leap through the opening. "If I can make through—" He cocked both hammers of the derringer, heard a shout of warning from the crowd outside, as part of the rear of the building caved in amid a volcano of sparks. Then he rushed from the doorway.

As if he had touched off a charge of dynamite, Stump heard a fierce blood-curdling yell and a chorus of wild shouts that broke like a wave on the din around the Good Samaritan. Stump flung himself

flat on the ground a dozen feet from the porch, seeking a target, hunting the figure of Big Barline. He turned his head toward the new sound and saw in the flame-lighted night a score of men rushing up from the river, yelling like Indians, guns barking. There was a stampede of feet, vague figures darted here and there. Stump caught a glimpse of a big man—Barline—and fired.

He heard Barline curse, and saw the man stumble, then gather himself and stagger into the darker safety up beyond the Den. He was making for the woods far back behind the shacks.

Somebody shouted, "Hey, Cassidy!"

It rose like a shotgun charge, and Stump saw now that the oncoming figures were troopers of the Seventh Cavalry. Colt's six-shooters were thundering in their fists and the troopers ran this way and that, chasing the outlaws from brush cover, driving them into the open. Bullets cut a man down, another flung up his hands in terror, begging for mercy. Stump leaped to his feet, shouting, "Here I am—it's me—Cassidy!" He began running around the flaming building. He saw sparks reaching to other shacks and these flamed up, blazing swift and bright. "Get Barline!" he called. "He's gettin' away!"

Some of the troopers came hurrying around the place in his wake yelling wildly like boys at an election bonfire. There was enough light now for them to see figures running desperately toward the brush and the dark woods beyond. Stump knew that Barline was in that brush somewhere and he plunged in. While Barline lived he must pursue.

As he struck the depth of the brush tangle, Cassidy heard the distinct sound of a man smashing his way through the branches, swinging off to his right, away from the others, making for the direction of the Missouri's shore. That man, he knew instinctively, must be the outlaw boss, Barline, sneaking off, dashing for freedom while the chase followed his more easily observed hirelings. Stump yelled at the top of his lungs to his trooper friends; "Keep after 'em, boys! Don't let 'em get away. I'll get Barline!"

And like a raging bear, Stump drove through the brush in pursuit of the fleeing Barline.

THE outlaw giant, weaponless, fear crazed, beat his way through the foliage like a hunted beast, panting, gasping for breath. He could hear the fading shouts of the soldiers chasing the others, but he could plainly hear the sounds made by one man who was slowly but surely closing up on him. If he could only reach the river bank, could but get a foot on the raft he knew was hidden there, he could escape. He'd go down river on the swift current.

Twisting, turning, running zig-zag, first right, then left, but bearing always toward the river, Barline ran heavily, stumbling, smashing branches and twigs, flinging curses behind him at the man whose voice he now made out clearly.

"You'll not get away!" Stump hollered after him. But Barline thought different. He came plunging out through a gap in the brush, saw the river in the pale light of the swiftly approaching dawn. He swerved suddenly, made a lumbering dash for a clump of bushes on the bank, and with a wild shout of derision leaped onto the small raft. A quick shove with the ready pole and he was moving away from the bank, his bulky body crouched low, lest Cassidy take a shot at him.

"No, you don't!" cried Stump, halting for a single moment, baffled, his empty derringer in his fist. As he called, he jumped swiftly, hurling the empty weapon at Barline. Then Stump gathered every ounce of power remaining in his body, took a quick run, as Barline ducked the flying derringer, and leaped far out from the bank, far out across the gap of river. An enormous jump it was, and Barline shouted, dug madly with his pole to get away. There was a chance and he raised his pole to strike at the hurtling Cassidy. That wild swing missed and Stump, like a great muscular cat, struck the edge of the raft on all fours, scrambling as the shaky craft sank momentarily beneath the surface of the river.

In that moment several things happened. The raft, impelled by the blow of Cassidy's landing, went spinning crazily out into the current. Barline, shaken from his stance, fell to his knees. Stump, half on the raft and half in the water, clung gasping—his eyes ablaze as he shook the water from his ears—holding grimly to the logs and facing

the snarling outlaw only a few feet away.

It was Stump who recovered first, and the ever-brightening light of sunrise saw him jerk himself aboard the raft, feet braced. It was then, in a quick glance, that he saw that Barline had lost the pole, that the two of them were adrift in the Missouri's current. He had no weapon and he guessed that the outlaw must be in the same plight else he would have shot him or come at him with a knife. Now he remembered Barline's knife. Back there in the dive. Where his own was he could not think. So it was just man to man there on a spinning, wabbling, frail raft of logs.

"You make a move toward me," growled Barline, gaining courage at last, "an' I'll tear yer head offa yer neck, yuh little wart!"

Stump grinned in Barline's face. It was a horrible grin, more animal than human for inside Cassidy's breast there flamed a fierce fire of revulsion, a hatred in his heart that he had never known toward any man. And he must destroy this human vulture—or be destroyed himself.

He tensed himself for the spring. It must be one or the other. Maybe both of them—finally. "Yo're a bluff, Barline," he said softly, and the bigger man instinctively leaned closer to hear. "Yo're yeller, an' right now yo're wishin' yuh never was born." He saw Barline's feet grip the wet logs, the big man's hands tense, and knew the moment had come. Like a charge of grape and chain-shot Stump Cassidy sprang at the outlaw. They met in the middle of the see-sawing raft, and locked in a grim struggle that must end in death. They fell sprawling on the slippery logs, amid a swirl of thudding fists, clawing fingers, and flying feet.

Down the river floated the little raft, spinning with the current, tipping dangerously with the shifting weight of the battle, while along the Missouri's banks, both banks now, men began to run and shout. They were mostly men in the blue of the army, bronzed cavalrymen, some with carbines in their hands. Some were Cassidy's pals returned to the shore with their prisoners from the fight. Others, those across the wide water, were troopers aroused by the fighting who came to investigate and now rushed along, keeping abreast of the raft. One or two carbines were leveled and then lowered, for it was impossible to risk a shot at the outlaw without endangering the life of the buckskin clad Cassidy. Shouts of advice echoed back and forth.

IN the first sunlight they saw the two figures fighting furiously on that raft, saw them grapple like a pair of wild cats, saw them roll perilously near the edge. From afar their ears could now catch the muffled sound of the two men snarling and growling, gasping for breath, and they watch fascinated as they saw the two figures climb painfully, slowly, to their staggering feet, spraddle-legged, grim, deadly.

Then, while the river took the frail craft in its mighty grip and whirled it around like a leaf, Stump Cassidy flung himself like a pit-terrier on the crouched outlaw. Off the raft they tottered, splashing into the muddy current with a great heaving of yellow water. Down out of sight went the two, locked fast.

As they disappeared, two troopers, one of them Dan Cahill, cried out to their comrades, and with a mighty shove pushed out into the river in a rowboat, leaving their mates to guard the cringing prisoners.

Rowing for dear life the soldiers raced for the spot where the two men had gone down. As they plied their oars, others shouted directions.

"There's one!" came a shout, as a man bobbed up on the surface. "It's Cassidy 'r I'm a half-breeed!"

The rowers drew up to the spot where a man's head bobbed in the brown flood. "Cassidy!" Cahill yelled. "Quick, gimme a hand with 'im!"

Together, they drew the almost lifeless body of Stump Cassidy into the boat, amid a volley of shouting from troopers on the fort side of the river. "There's the other one—there he goes—down river!"

The two troopers in the boat took a hard glance at the floating body sweeping away from them down river. They knew a dead man when they saw him, and this one hadn't died by drowning. They turned to Cassidy, who was coughing and spitting over the side, shaking his head and wiping the water from his eyes with blood-smeared hands. Blood, too, ran slowly from the wound in his upper right arm. "Where's Barline?" demanded Stump, half-dazed.

"The eels'll make a hearty meal offa him, m' lad," laughed Cahill. "He's floatin' down river with the scum, where he belongs. You was that near dead yoreself, mister. How yuh feelin'?"

"Just wet," replied Stump. "Did you fellers catch up with those other devils?"

The troopers pointed to the shore, where the others were gathered. Cassidy could now make out two prisoners, guarded—a sullen pair, who watched the approaching boat glumly. As the rowboat neared the bank all heard a new sound that turned every face up-river. It was the blast of a horn. A flatboat was rounding the river bend and there were a score of men aboard it, all standing, staring at the smoldering ruins of the Devil's Den.

The rowboat and the big heavy flatboat pushed ashore almost at the same moment, and there was a scramble of men shouting questions. The troopers helped Stump ashore, and he began stamping his feet, dancing to shake the water from his head.

"What's comin' off here?" he demanded calmly, when he was able to make himself heard. The men, most of them, from the flatboat were coming along the bank toward Cassidy and the soldiers.

"That's what we want to know!" called out a tall, lank man who led the flatboatmen and appeared to be spokesman. He wore a faded black coat, the collar of which was turned up and held there by a ragged scarf.

One of the troopers grunted and said, "There was a fire. Can't yuh see?"

"Fire, hell," snorted the lank fellow. He pointed to the motionless bodies of two outlaws who lay where they had fallen in the gun battle. "Them fellers was shot." He glanced around, looking for someone, then added, "Where's Barline?"

Trooper Cahill pushed forward, facing the lank man, and indicated Cassidy with a finger. "This lad took care o' Barline in good shape. Barline's dead." He told them about the fight on the raft and where they might find the outlaw chief's floating body if they hurried down river.

The lank man crowed with frank delight, then turned quickly hardened eyes to the two prisoners, Barline's henchmen. "That bein' the case," he said, whipping out a heavy pistol, "we'll just take care o' these no-good hellions." He made a motion to one of his crowd who ran quickly back to the flatboat. "Hangin' is really to damn good fer them, but we can't take no more chances with the law functionin' hereabouts."

STUMP studied this fellow silently, then edged carelessly away and around the crowd to where he found a trooper with a handy carbine. This he appropriated with a mumbled word, and the next thing anybody knew, Cassidy was standing close to the lank man with the cocked carbine muzzle a finger span from the other's ribs.

"Put down that gun, mister," ordered Stump coolly. "Who are you to be hornin' in here an' takin' the play away from us? We did the cleanin' up here an' these fellers are our prisoners."

"Holy jumpin!" growled the flatboatman, while his companions fell back warily, seeing other troopers now aroused and holding their weapons ready. "What's the idear? We're doin' yuh a favor, doin' the whole damn' country a good turn. What 're yuh figgerin' to do with them outlaws anyway?"

"Get them to Bismarck," answered Stump, "the law can handle 'em, can't it?"

At this the boatmen guffawed. "Yore a stranger 'round here, mister, an' yuh don't know what we're up against," declared the tall man. "Them fellers'd git clean away, go scot free, if yuh turned 'em over to the law. One's bad as t'other. It's us Regulators thet put the fear in 'em. Jes' you let us handle 'em," he motioned to one of their number who had arrived with a bundle of rope. "We got the on'y kind o' medicine fer a community what's sick o' outlawin'."

Stump remained silent, backing carefully off and nudging Cahill. He said to the trooper, under his breath. "Is this some kinda trick? I figger these gents are plannin' to get the outlaws an' then help 'em to escape."

"Yo're wrong, Cassidy," muttered the cavalryman who knew many of the citizens of Bismarck and the political situation there. "That guy is Turkey Nixon, an' he's tellin' you right."

Nixon, who suspected Cassidy's doubts, spoke up. "You turn these fellers over to us, mister, an' yuh kin toddle along an' see 'em stretch rope. We ain't foolin'. Too damn serious, this business. These fellers,"

he indicated the two trembling prisoners, "an' that Barline varmint, they been murderin' men wholesale here. Stabbed two friends of mine to death right here."

Cassidy nodded gravely. If the soldiers knew the man to be what he claimed and knew the hopelessness of conviction under the weak law controlling the district, then who was he to thwart justice—when it was justice that he sought? And, anyway, he had accounted for the cruel leader, Barline.

"You win, mister," said Stump, lowering the carbine. "But if I ever learn that you let these two get away from you, you'd better dig out for distant parts. I've got personal reasons for wipin' this place, and the skunks that holed up here, off the face o' the earth."

"Yo're shore a bloodthirsty gent," laughed Turkey Nixon, "but it ain't none o' my business, 'cept to hang these varmints higher'n a kite."

Stump drew aside as the Regulators closed in on the outlaws. He and his cavalrymen friends watched the two led, struggling fiercely, away from the river toward the edge of the woods. There was something grim about the deadly silence of the Regulators. At the river bank Stump said to Dan Cahill: "I've seen men hung before and I don't hanker to watch, but I'd shore like to be certain those hellions—"

"Don't worry, Cassidy, me boy," cut in Cahill. "There'll be no foolin' back there by the woods. Them fellers mean business."

Stump got into one of the boats, and the soldiers rowed across to the reservation where a lot of troopers meet them enthusiastically. They slapped the soaking wet Cassidy on the back and poked him playfully in the ribs. As they began walking back to the buildings of the post, they heard the first blast of the bugle blowing Reveille. With a wild shout the troopers, every last one of them, broke into a mad race for the barracks, leaving Stump Cassidy to follow, walking, tired, feeling suddenly alone, but bearing himself like a man who has done something of which he is not ashamed. Big Barline would never again buy a white girl for two jugs of whiskey—or for two hoots in hell.

Along the front of the long, low, log barracks, soldiers were falling into line as fast as their legs would carry them. Stump Cassidy slowed his gait when he saw that he could not reach the buildings before the formation. He halted there, a lone figure on the broad plain, within sight of the troops and the families of the men and officers. And, because he, too, had once been a soldier, he stiffened there, heels together, at the first note of the bugle, and stood with hand to his eyebrow in salute as the flag was raised to its place atop the pole.

Stump knew even before he was told by Sergeant Pierce, that Colonel Custer had learned about the affair across the river. Some of his soldier friends had been discovered jumping into their places at assembly, breathless, panting, and only a moment before it was too late.

There were many eyes turned on him as he strode up to the first building and started for the barracks where he had left his personal belongings. A group of soldiers' wives waved to him, and then Stump grinned in sudden pleasure.

BETH SETTON stood there, her clear eyes wide, her lips parted.

"'Lo," said Stump, turning toward her. "What's everybody standin' around for? You look excited, Beth—anything happen?"

"Peter Cassidy," said Beth, impulsively reaching toward him, seeing the blood-clotted slash in his buckskin sleeve. "As if you didn't know what happened! We know all about—you. Do you suppose all that shooting and the fire and everything could be just across there—and we not wonder?" She started leading him through the throng of gathering women and troopers. "Here, you must let me fix up your arm. I know you've been hurt."

"It's nothing, just a little scratch," argued Stump. "Better let me go over to the men's barracks where I can clean up."

"Nonsense," cried Beth. "It was all on account of me. I know about it, Peter. You must let me look at your wound."

Stump saw there was no way out of it. He followed her into the log house where Sergeant Pierce lived with his family. Mary Pierce, the non-com's wife, a buxom, motherly woman, at once took charge, and the two women hovered over the embarrassed Cassidy. He welcomed the sudden entrance of the sergeant himself.

"Hyah, Cassidy," greeted the sergeant,

quickly inspecting the wound on Stump's arm. "Heard all about it. Some fight, eh? Well, I hope nothin' comes of it, m' lad, but the colonel found out about it and I'm supposed to have you report to him at his quarters right after Mess."

Beth Setton's eyes raised in alarm. "Oh Sergeant Pierce," she cried, "Peter won't be arrested, will he?"

"Can't tell," replied Pierce, soberly. "Colonel Custer's a tough commander when it comes to discipline. Mebbe send him to Leavenworth."

"La, now, Beth." Mary Pierce frowned at her husband and patted Beth's shoulder. "Pay no attention to him. If Colonel Custer wants to see your man—I mean Mister Cassidy, it's to give him a medal, I've no doubt. There, stand still, Peter Cassidy." She finished the bandaging of his arm and shot a triumphant glance at her husband. Mary Pierce was a natural matchmaker and here was a romance in which she would brook none of her soldier husband's interference. "All you need, Mister Cassidy," she added, beaming on Stump, "is a nice young wife to keep you in line."

Stump was tongue-tied, but he finally managed to mumble his thanks to Mary Pierce. To Beth he said, "Where's Chuck?"

"Down at the stables," murmured Beth. "He's to come here the moment Mess blows, so Mrs. Pierce told him."

"Oh, yes," affirmed that kindly lady, "Beth and her little brother are to stay here with us while yo're away with the troops, Mister Cassidy."

STUMP was relieved. From the moment he had seen Beth again he had been wondering silently what he should do about the girl. The idea of taking her back East to relatives had not appealed to him, nor did he relish the thought of finding her some home in Bismarck. This was a wild territory, and a young woman alone, with a small brother, would face more dangers than merely Indian raiders. If only—if—Stump turned toward Beth with a baffled expression, saw her watching him eagerly.

He summed up all the courage of his heart. What if he should ask this girl to become his wife—and she should spurn him? But if she accepted him . . . ? He beckoned to her almost timidly, and felt his face reddening. She came to him quickly, her face lifted, her eyes alight, and Stump lowered his faltering voice so that only she would hear.

"I was wondering, Beth," he said, "if I came back here after seein' Colonel Custer, an' I asked you to me my wife, what you'd think o' me—'r—I mean what might yore answer be."

Beth Setton's face glowed in the light from the open doorway, the rosy light of early morning. She put a hand on Cassidy's bandaged arm and said to him in little more than a whisper, which she controlled with a visible effort, "I was wondering, too, Peter—from the moment we heard the shootin' in the night, and I found out it was a certain black-eyed, black-haired man I knew who was causing all the fighting, and I was worried sick. And I'm still worried, Peter. Suppose Colonel Custer has you sent to the guard-house? How could I marry you then, even if I wanted to—"

Stump laughed softly, and sneaked his good arm around her slender waist, drawing her into the shadow away from the light. "I'll tear the guard-house down with my bare hands, Beth!" He grinned happily, and she let him keep his arm around her, the two of them standing there, oblivious to the activity of Sergeant Pierce's wife at the stove across the room, until the brassy notes of the bugle sounded Mess and there was a rush of troopers' booted feet charging from the barracks.

The exact words of Colonel George Armstrong Custer and frontiersman Peter "Stump" Cassidy in the former's private study at Fort Abe Lincoln on that bright morning in the spring of the year 1873, were never bandied around among the soldiery. Nor did Stump himself ever repeat the conversation. Suffice it to say that Stump emerged from the colonel's quarters, grinning cheerfully. He did not go to the guard-house, or to Leavenworth Prison, and those who knew the famous Custer of those hectic days declare that, had it been within the long-haired Indian fighter's authority, he would have presented a medal to Peter Cassidy.

CONESTOGA TRAP

The wagon raiders set a cross-fire ambush for the plodding caravan, but the buckskin scout and his handful of misfits switched the slaughter sign.

By R. S. LERCH

BRAND CARTER halted at the outer edge of the cedars, his dun-colored pony and his own buckskins affording almost perfect protective coloration. The wagon train was getting into Indian country and, as scout, Brand had ranged wide and nearly a half day's travel ahead. There had been vague rumors of several eastbound trains lost in this vicinity, but he had discovered no sign of hostile Indians. He had seen one small band of Utes, but they had their squaws and young 'uns along so they were not looking for loot or trouble. From the shelter of the timber on the heights, his keen, gray-eyed glance searched the uplands across the valley. Nothing moved, nor was there signal smoke any place within his field of vision.

He came out of the timber and rode to the edge of the flat where he could look almost straight down on the trace. The sun was swinging down to the west, but he wanted one look at this pass before turning back. He took his look, a long one—a steady, shocked stare.

He was gazing down on a line of skeletons that stretched as far as he could see along the pass. They were the blackened, burned skeletons of big Conestogas, the charred remains of a gigantic wagon train. Or there might have been several smaller trains; this was an eastbound section of the trace and eastbound trains were not often large. There were little white spots on the ground among the ruins of the wagons. These, Brand knew, would be the skeletons of men, and women, and children.

Farther along a buzzard rose slowly on ragged wings.

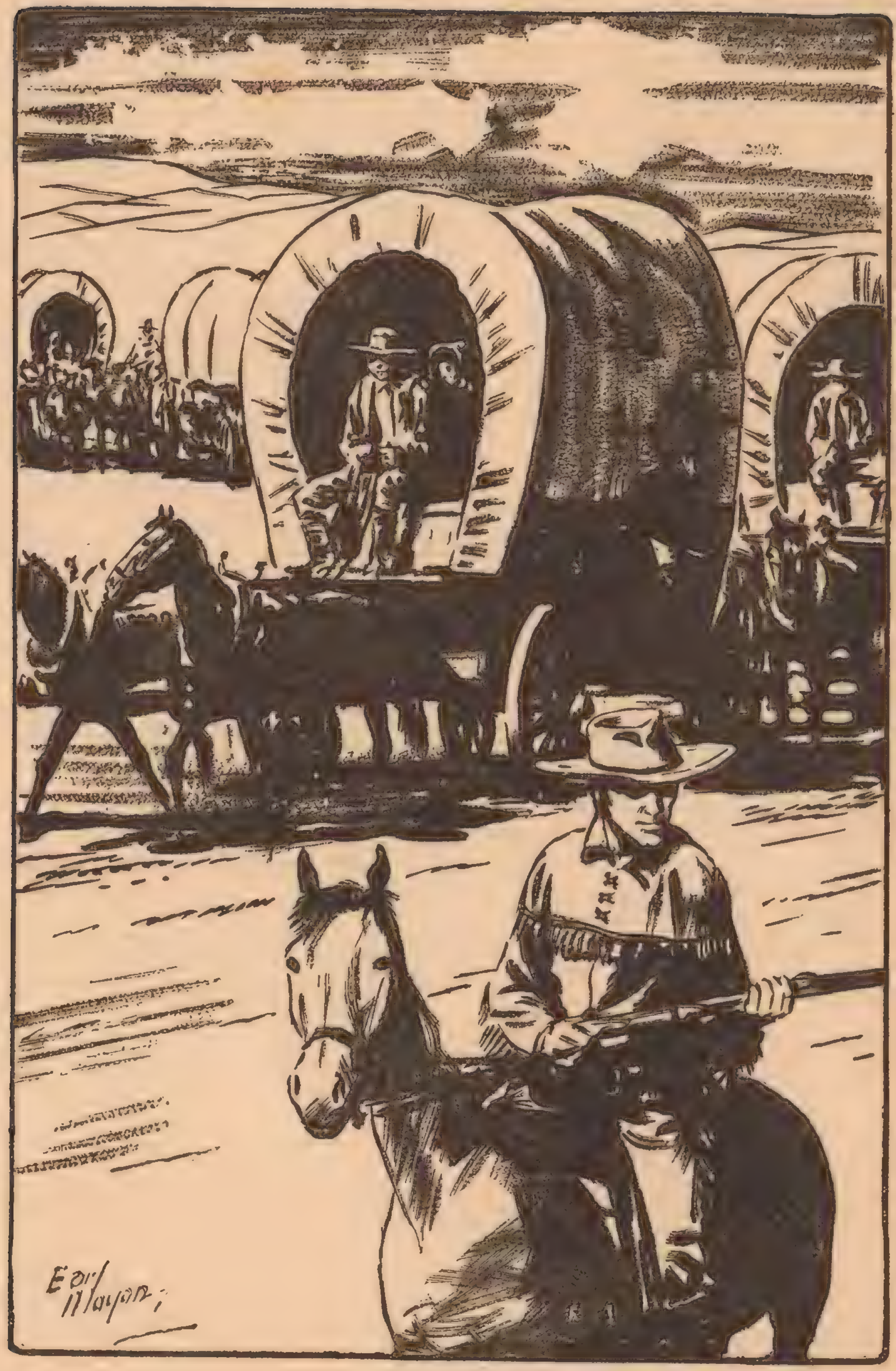
Brand turned to a more gentle slope. As his mount picked its sure way downward, Brand Carter tried to master the dread and apprehension that had swept over him when he had first viewed the site of the massacre. He was afraid of what closer examination might reveal. He had scouted for a big westbound outfit with the intention of hunting for his sister and her husband, who had gone west the year before. He had learned in Carson that they had started back east several weeks before. They had been of the fortunate few. They had come to homestead, had discovered placer gold in the banks of the creek flowing through their land, and had taken out a fortune. Stephen Craig had then given up his land that he might return his gentle, loyal wife to the comforts, pleasures and luxuries she had given up for him.

It was at Carson that Brand had met big, bluff Cotton Barlow. Barlow, too, it was rumored, had taken a fortune out of the ground. He was making up a train to head back east and he asked Brand to guide and scout for him. It was he who had given Brand the information about his brother-in-law.

A man by the name of Luce Martino had been hired as scout for the train the Craigs had joined, Barlow said. Brand Carter didn't like that. He'd met Martino twice, a swarthy, vindictive man who knew the wilderness, but who became careless. He'd lost one train, escaping himself only by consummate cunning and desperate flight.

The second time Brand had met Martino the man was insulting the daughter of a homesteader. Luce Martino wasn't such an attractive sight when Brand Carter got through with him that time. He'd crawled away swearing horrible revenge.

Brand would have gone on alone to catch up with Martino's train had it not been for the brawl in Carson. A roughneck had tried to lift Carter's bullet pouch, apparently thinking it contained gold. Car-



ter had knocked the man down, and then found himself cornered by the thief's gang. Big Cotton Barlow had barged in with a club, and had probably saved Brand Carter from getting a knife between the ribs. He owed Barlow something for that. Furthermore, he liked the gruff, stocky wagon master. He had agreed to ride with Barlow's train as scout.

The pony reached the trace and Brand turned him toward the pass, fear of what he would find among those wagon skeletons submerging in his mind all but the image of his sister and the fine man who was her husband.

He found what he expected, a long line of charred wagon remains, half burned equipment, and white, buzzard-cleaned bones extending from one end of the pass to the other. The place was a natural trap, narrow, with wooded sloping sides where there was concealment for ambushers. From the varied conditions of the bones, equipment, and wagon-skeletons, Brand figured there had been at least three trains, possibly more, and that they had all been headed east. The latest must have entered the gap not more than two weeks previously.

There were other signs that first puzzled him and then brought a vague, disquieting suspicion. There were surprisingly few arrows, even broken ones not worth retrieving. The trains had been attacked in daylight, for they had been strung out, and this was not the Ute method. He examined many of the fresher skull-caps of the skeletons. Not one showed the faintest sign of a cut or scratch which must occasionally result from the quick, circular slash of the scalping knife. And hair of the men and women lay near their bones.

It was during this examination that he found the skeleton of a man, face down. There was a bullet hole in his forehead and under his fleshless hand lay a rifle. Near him was the lighter skeleton of a woman with one out-flung arm over the back of the man. Buzzards and carrion-feeding carnivore had crushed and separated some of the bones, but it was evident the woman had been mourning the death of her man. There was a bullet hole in the side of her skull, and the little derringer that had made the kill lay close to her hand. She had evidently died by her own act rather than fall into the hands of the attackers.

Brand Carter stared at the hank of long, fine, brown hair near the skull-cap. Then he knelt and reached forward, and his hand hesitated just above the double-barreled little gun as if he were afraid to pick it up. When he did he looked at the right side of the upper barrel. In fine script there had been etched in the steel, "Louise from Brand."

HE had found his sister and her husband, and for seemingly endless moments he stared at nothing while he remained motionless as the dead around him. Though he made no visible movement a gradual change became apparent in his lean features. They grew leaner, sharper, harder.

At length he arose and scouted the steep sides of the gap. What had been disquieting suspicion then became horrible certainty. Here, under cover of bushes, were carefully concealed log barriers behind which the ambushing party had knelt in safety while they shot down their helpless victims. The logs showed the work of sharp axes, white men's axes. These massacres had not been the work of Indian raiding or war parties, but of white men. Brand Carter now understood that only trains were attacked in which men were returning to civilization with fortunes in gold.

The sun was low in the west when he finally headed back along the trace toward the night's camp. As he rode into the red sunset his narrowed glance habitually darted over the slopes of the ridges and mountains on each side.

He felt the tug at his skin cap before he heard the rifle report, and he slid from the saddle and lay prone behind the barely adequate shelter of a boulder, his long rifle before him, his sharp gaze centering bushes crowning the ridge north of the trace.

He lay without moving, but the man above seemed suspicious that the scout had remained in the saddle a trifle longer than he would have if hit fatally. The ambusher would not come into the open to investigate. Once Brand saw the tops of the bushes sway slightly, but he could

detect no solid substance beneath the movement. When twilight deepened to night he arose and took off his cap. A double hole had been cut through the skin at the top. The ambusher was no rifleman, since he had not allowed for the tendency to overshoot in firing down hill.

Carter halted in the dark and surveyed with a touch of disgust the circle of eight wagons in the glade on the other side of the stream. There were small cooking fires within the circle and the men, women, and children were gathered around them. They were not pilgrims, for they had made the trip out, but they were a poor lot. They were the misfits, the broken, discouraged, and the desperately homesick. Around some of the fires there was a touch of laughter, a little gaiety. These people were headed home, and anticipation lightened their hearts.

But there were several who were enigmas. There was Stillson, who took care of the cavvy and hunted on the side, a morose, taciturn, and unsocial individual. He was partnered with Crane who also did a little hunting for the train. And there was Rossiter, the gambler, who was likewise a meat getter, a cold-faced individual who took some pride in his personal appearance, who was courteous to all and friendly toward none, and who traveled alone. Brand Carter had an idea that this courtesy was a mask, like his impassive face, to hide whatever deeper emotions a more volatile man might betray. And there was Cotton Barlow, the master of the wagon train. As Barlow's voice came to him, booming some ribald pleasantry across the circle to another camp fire, Brand's eyes narrowed.

Stillson was not anywhere in camp. His partner, Crane, was cooking his own meal by a small fire. Over by another fire Rossiter was skinning a doe he had brought in. Then, on the point of crossing the ford, movement to the north of the trail jerked Brand's gaze up the slope. The lean, hard-faced Stillson was riding slowly into camp and there was the carcass of a spike-horn buck lashed behind his saddle. Brand Carter crossed to the camp and joined Cotton Barlow.

It was after their meal that Brand drew the leader outside the circle of wagons. He told Barlow what he had found and the square-built, red-faced man let out a rumbling oath. Barlow asked,

"Did you see anything of them, any evidence they'll tackle us? I've got over fifty thousand in dust under my wagon seat, every damned cent I have in the world. And I got a hunch that meat-hunter of ours, the gambler Rossiter, is taking a stake back east, too. An' there may be some of the others who ain't said nothing. Our outfit 'd be rich pickin' for them wolves."

Brand shrugged his shoulders noncommittally, then said, "My sister and brother-in-law left their bones in that pass."

COTTON BARLOW jerked a little at that, and murmured, "So you're leaving us now to hunt down that outfit?"

Brand shook his head. "Not right now. Who was away from the train since noon?"

Barlow stared at him, then cursed again as he caught the implication in the question.

"You think one of our outfit's a traitor —a spy for the gang?"

"They have to have some way to learn which outfits are profitable to wipe out. Those who get through are the ones it doesn't pay to attack. Who has been away from the train today?" Brand repeated.

"Crane, Stillson, and Rossiter," the leader returned promptly. "Crane went out shortly after noon and met us about five o'clock. He had no luck with his hunting. His partner, Stillson, went out and got back just before you. Harvey Rossiter left shortly after Crane and got back just ahead of Stillson."

"Crane's a rotten shot, Stillson and Rossiter only fair," Carter mused.

Cotton Barlow stared his question. Brand answered by removing his skin cap and running a finger through the two holes in the crown. "He was above me, and overshot," he stated laconically.

After a short interval of silence Barlow asked, "What do we do from here on? No other trail we can take, I suppose?"

Carter shook his head. "No other trail unles we back-track some eighty miles," he replied. Then, "First, give orders tonight that we'll lay over here a day to

give the stock a chance to rest, and to make repairs on the wagons and gear. You might hint that I saw signs that the Utes had wiped out a train on the trail ahead."

Cotton Barlow asked, "What good will that do? What's on your mind?"

"It'll let their spy think that I believe that what happened to me and what I saw in the pass was the work of Indians, that I'm not suspicious of the truth. For the rest, I'll let you know tomorrow. In the meantime you might give some thought as to who would be the best men in a fight. Even th' best 'll be poor enough."

Cotton's wide shoulders rose and fell in a noncommittal shrug. "I'll do that—and they might surprise you. They'll be fighting for all they got left to live for," he answered with a somewhat forced loyalty to those who looked on him as their leader.

This time Brand shrugged as he turned back toward the circle of wagons.

The nightly tasks about the fires were finished and the fires themselves died to little piles of glowing coals. The brilliant stars continued their slow march across the vault of the sky and a sickle moon gave little light. Somewhere up on the heights a cat screamed. A lobo pointed his long nose to the stars and his mournful howl rolled down the slopes and through the valleys.

One of the blanket-wrapped figures on the ground raised his head and his gaze carefully examined the others. All remained motionless, breathing evenly in sleep. The watcher bent his gaze on a figure near him, the figure of a man in buckskins who used no blanket and who slept with his long rifle by his side. For a long time that gaze did not shift. Neither did the buckskin-clad figure. At length, cautiously, silently, and with infinite patience, the man eased out of his blankets, merged with the blackness outside the wagon circle, waited and watched once more. Still none of the sleepers moved. Finally he faded into the bushes beyond the campsite.

Only then did Brand Carter arise and, leaving his rifle, take the trail. Following the man was easy, for once out of hearing of the wagons and convinced that he had left the camp undetected, he moved more swiftly, careless of the noise he made. Carter followed the sounds with the silence and lithe ease of a panther. Within a hundred yards Brand Carter knew he was on a well-used trail.

Brand estimated that they had gone nearly three miles toward the scene of the slaughter and were some three miles south of the trace when the sound of movement ahead ceased. He waited, thought he heard voices, and moved forward again like a wraith. A turn in the trail and he saw yellow light ahead, then the outline of a long, low cabin deep in a concealing shelter of a heavy clump of blue spruce. The sound of voices coming through a gut-covered window was clearer.

He left the trail and circled to the window. Easing upward, he touched the corner of the covering with the needle-sharp point of his knife. He looked through that tiny hole and for a long moment forgot everything but the face of the man seated at the table listening to the quick report of the visitor from the wagon train.

DARK, glowing eyes, a swarthy, shapeless face, uneven and lumpy, with a nose smashed crooked at the bridge, with bulges of scar tissue above the eyes and an uneven line where the jaw-bone had been broken and improperly set—a man who might once have been handsome, but was now only a battered caricature.

Brand Carter's fingers gripped the haft of his knife until the knuckles were white and bloodless. He understood now whatever may have puzzled him before. Despite the disfigurement for which Brand himself had been responsible, he recognized Luce Martino, scout for eastbound trains, and head of the ruthless band of white murderers who surrounded him and listened to the report of his agent on the movements of his next intended prey.

Gradually Carter's attention was directed to those he could see of the dozen other men in the long room. He recognized a few, men he had seen on the trail or in some of the western towns. All of them bore the stamp of viciousness and greedy living. A slatternly woman, who might once have been attractive,

shuffled around pouring liquor in the tin cups the men held out as she approached. Brand wondered if she had been a captive from one of the earlier trains. He wondered how many other women had been taken alive, to disappear in this den and never be seen again.

The messenger arose. Brand Carter slipped back into the woods and circled, keeping wide of the trail and moving at a swinging trot. When Martino's spy eased into the circle of wagons Brand Carter was lying in the same position on the same spot he had occupied when the spy had left.

SINCE they were not moving the next day it was unnecessary for Brand to arise and scout before daylight to find out whether it was safe for the wagon train to break circle and string out. He ate his breakfast with Cotton Barlow. Barlow said, softly, so none of those near by would hear:

"I've picked in my mind six men I think can be counted on. You were going to tell me this morning what you'd planned."

Carter nodded. "After they've finished eating go to each one quietly and tell him to go across the creek to an open spot about a hundred yards from here. Have them leave singly so the rest of the train won't become suspicious. I'll join you."

Barlow looked at his scout sharply, but since no further information was forthcoming he nodded agreement and arose to approach one of the men. Brand waited until each of the selected men had left camp, then he, too, went into the woods, circled, and came out on the trace where they were waiting.

Apparently Barlow had told them only that their scout would explain when he arrived. Joining them, Brand suggested they squat while he told his story.

He outlined what he had found the day before, what he believed they were heading into, and stated that he had suggested a lay-over at this camp so that they might prepare for the trouble ahead. He told nothing of his expedition during the night, or suggested there was one among them who was reporting their movements to the murder gang. When he had finished, his narrow gaze searched the faces of the men. Some of those faces were flushed, some had paled. One of the men cursed softly to himself. Crane turned his wide gaze to his partner and Stillson's lips were flat against his teeth. The cavvy tender swore once, then became silent. And there was the ex-gambler, Rossiter. His face remained as cold and emotionless as it usually was. His thin-lipped smile appeared briefly as he asked,

"You have some plan, Brand. I take it we've been chosen to carry the fight to them, if they can be found. That right?"

"That's right," Carter agreed. "I did more scouting than I told you about. I discovered their hide-out, a long cabin with three windows covered with gut or oiled paper on each side and a door at each end. We'll carry the fight to them—tonight. They probably have a look-out watching our camp from some high point. When they discover we are staying over a day, they'll keep to their cabin. Cotton Barlow and I will plan our expedition in detail during the day and in the meantime I suggest that you say nothing to any of the others until just before we leave."

"But how do you know that they intend to attack us, or even that they know we're here?" Rossiter asked quietly.

Brand Carter took off his cap and shoved a finger through the hole in the top.

"One of them was apparently watching the gap. He took a shot at me, tried to prevent me coming back to report what I'd discovered. If he'd aimed a half inch lower he'd have succeeded. Now let's get back before someone comes hunting us to see what's up."

Brand touched Cotton Barlow's arm, restraining the leader from following the men as they moved back to the camp. Barlow eyed him narrowly.

"How'd you know about that hide-out? You never told me that yesterday," he challenged.

"I found it last night, following the man who went to report we were laying over today. That's why I wanted the lay-over, to discover the spy."

"Who?" Barlow demanded harshly.

"I told the men what I'd discovered so I could show him to you, prove my point

when he goes to warn his gang of our intentions. He'll do it soon as he can leave camp without arousing suspicion, for he's one of the men you chose, and he'll want to be with us tonight to avoid arousing suspicion. Come on." Without giving the leader a chance to ask more questions he led the way south from the trace.

WITHIN an hour a man was hurrying along the faint trail Carter had followed the night before. What looked like a loose vine suddenly became taut. The man tripped and pitched forward on his face. Before he had sprawled Cotton Barlow charged from the bushes and dove at him. Brand Carter appeared, knelt, and whipped the man's arms backward, lashing them together at the wrists. Then he and Barlow drew back and waited for their prisoner to sit up.

Brand said quietly, "One instance where you failed was in not taking the most elementary of frontier precautions last night, Rossiter. You kept going instead of hiding and waiting to see if you were followed."

Rossiter's cold features never changed their set expression. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Serves me right for trying to play another man's game. Lost all I had in a game with a gambler who was slicker than me last time Luce Martino was in Carson. Just before he took his last wagon train east Martino put the proposition of me joining the next train with money and acting as his spy. Well, I've made my gamble and lost. Let's get it over."

Both Brand and Cotton, listening to the cool voice, could not help but admire the nerve of the man. He expected nothing less than death and his only request was that they kill him quickly. Cotton Barlow shook his head.

"You'll get a trial, before the whole wagon train, Rossiter. They'll decide what's to be done, not I."

Rossiter's steady gaze held the leader for a moment. He said, still quietly, "I don't suppose it will do any good to tell you I'm glad I didn't hit Brand yesterday, that I didn't like my job, that I was sorry I took it on, and that only my word to Martino made me go through with it. Nor would it do any good to tell you that this was to be my last connection with the gang and that, now I've been stopped, I'd like to make up in some way for the harm I've already done?"

Cotton Barlow said just as quietly, "You're right, Rossiter, it won't do any good."

Rossiter nodded as though he had expected nothing more. Then he turned to Brand.

"Carter," he said, "don't let Luce Martino take you alive. Your death wouldn't be easy, or quick."

Brand said, "Thanks."

And then Barlow helped the prisoner to his feet. A half mile from the camp the two led Rossiter into an aspen grove. Here they made him lie down and they tied his ankles, and then ran a loose thong from his wrists to a tree, so that he might have a restricted freedom of movement.

Barlow said, "I'll leave word with one of the men who are not going where to find you, in case neither Brand nor myself return from our trip tonight."

Rossiter did not reply. He turned his steady gaze on Brand Carter and asked,

"A favor, Carter? Let me whisper it to you."

Cotton Barlow turned and walked away. Carter listened, his face stony, while the gambler whispered a short request. Then Brand reached inside the gambler's coat and transferred something to Rossiter's bound hands.

During the balance of the day Brand Carter watched the men chosen for the night raid. At first a feeling almost of contempt at their inadequacy rode him. And then he began to notice little things. They went about their tasks soberly, quietly, but not despondently. They stayed close to their own folks. They went over such weapons as they had, cleaning rifles and loading them carefully, sharpening knives. There was an absorption in their work, but there was little outward evidence of fear. In several instances there was almost an eagerness, an elation. They had been picked over the others; they were the best in this train. Self-respect and the urge to prove worthy was in the process of being reborn.

Brand went out of camp to be alone with his own thoughts. He let memory run its course. He took the little derringer from his pocket and examined both of the barrels. There was still a charge in one. He drew it, put in fresh powder and cap, and replaced the lead pellet. He ran one finger slowly over the inscription on the barrel, then arose and returned to the camp where he sought out Cotton Barlow and outlined his plan for the night.

LUCE MARTINO and his gang celebrated in anticipation. By this time tomorrow there would be at least fifty thousand dollars more in their cache. After this raid they could all scatter with fortunes in their pockets. Rossiter had not come with further news, which meant there had been no change in the plans. Tomorrow he would lag behind the wagon train to pick off any who managed to get away and tried to retreat to safety.

Sometime during this night Rossiter would bounce the barrel of his gun off the head of the sleeping scout and carry him into the bushes beside the trail, and then lead away his horse. When the members of the wagon train awakened they would think Brand was out on scout. Rossiter had positive orders not to kill Brand Carter. A grin twisted Martino's ravaged features as he dwelt on what he would do to Carter. He raised his tin cup high to drink to the orgy of torture he was going to indulge in.

The cup stayed in mid-air, and the grin froze, while the little eyes beneath their bunches of scar tissue widened in startled surprise.

At the near end of the cabin, leaning negligently against the frame of the open door, was a figure in buckskin. The left hand was raised to rest against the frame above his head, the right hand was in the pocket of his jerkin, and the face was as devoid of emotion as that of a granite bust. Only the eyes were alive, glinting with a cold fire that sobered the outlaw leader. Martino lowered the cup slowly while his lips formed the words,

"Brand Carter." And he didn't know whether he said them aloud or not.

"I've heard you were looking for me, Martino. You and your gang murdered my sister and her husband, and so I'm here."

For a moment the fear generated by the awful beating he had taken at the hands of this scout coursed through Martino's veins, leaving him weak of will and of strength. And then the blinding rage and hate which had ridden him for months swept back the fear. He roared a curse and leaped to his feet.

A moment of silence followed the curse as the others saw the solitary figure in the doorway. Some of the men reached for their knives. Others jumped toward the bunks where their guns stood. All suspected that the sudden appearance of this man indicated others were with him to clean out their nest.

In confirmation of their suspicion the door at the opposite end of the building swung back and the stocky figure of Cotton Barlow filled the opening. Unlike the scout, there was a rifle in his hands, held level at the hip and trained on the nearest outlaw. His voice cracked like the reports of a blacksnake whip.

"Don't anybody move. This place is surrounded. Line up against the wall with your hands in the air. You'll be given a fair trial."

As if his words were a signal, there were ripping and tearing sounds around the cabin. A long slit in the covering, the barrel of a rifle, and the head of a tight-faced man appeared at each of five of the windows. But compelling rage was on Luce Martino.

"Fair trial, hell!" he roared, and his right hand whipped up to the back of his neck.

Brand Carter's hand came out of his pocket as he leaped forward. The little derringer roared and a black hole appeared in the center of Luce Martino's nose. The throwing knife Martino had jerked from its sheath between his shoulder blades clattered to the floor. Carter dropped the derringer and slid out his own knife as his left arm caught the falling Martino and hugged him close.

Gun thunder rocked the cabin. Martino's body jerked to the impact of lead meant for the scout. Brand whipped in an overhand cast and the point of the thrown knife buried itself in the throat of a man who had swung his rifle to cover.

Cotton Barlow. Barlow had fired, drawn a knife of his own, and closed with another outlaw. The men at the windows swarmed through.

One of the outlaws swung his rifle above his head to bring it down on the skull of Stillson, who was parrying another's knife thrust. From the shadows at the corner beside the fireplace an unkempt figure in a torn dress and dishevelled gray hair shuffled forward and swung a cast-iron skillet. The gunclubber went down with a crushed skull.

THE sounds of fighting suddenly ceased. Brand let the body of Martino slide to the floor and looked at the men he had led to the attack. Slowly, a faint smile appeared on his grim face. The men, the dejected, beaten, discouraged misfits, were looking at the results of their fight for their women and children and what little possessions they had left. He could detect on their faces the rebirth of hope and pride, and the will and confidence to accomplish. They would continue east where they belonged, but they would not go back beaten. They would return to start anew, and to succeed.

Cotton Barlow walked up to Brand. The scout picked up the derringer he had dropped. Barlow said,

"One of us better get back and take Rossiter to camp. We want to get that trial out of the way before we go on."

Brand shook his head. "There won't be any trial. Rossiter asked me, as a last favor, to get his pistol out of his inside coat pocket and place it in his hands. Before we reached camp I heard a muffled report, like a gunshot would sound if the muzzle were pressed against a man's side."

After a second of silence the leader said, "It's better that way."

Brand continued, "I'll go back to camp and tell the women their men are all safe. I suggest you set the men digging graves, and then hunt for their cache of loot. The gang have probably squandered a lot, but there should be some left. Possibly the woman can tell you where it is. It would be impossible to discover its rightful owners now, and the men who did the job tonight deserve it. I suggest you cut the woman in for a share. She saved Stillson's life, and she's a victim, not a member, of the gang."

Cotton Barlow nodded. "Right. What we find will give these men a new start in life, and that's all they need."

It was late the following afternoon when Brand Carter looked at a little derringer in his hand, then knelt and placed it in a shallow grave beside the skeletons of a man and a woman. He filled the grave and mounted his waiting pony. When he turned and rode back toward the camp, peace seemed to have come to him, and a touch of eagerness. In a way, he felt as though he were going home, going to friends who would be truly glad to see him. The women and children had made him feel that, when he had returned with the news that their men were safe. It was a feeling he had not experienced in a long time. He thought of his and Louise's old mother and father in Virginia. Louise and Stephen Craig had been going back there. Maybe he would complete the trip for them.

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

PEARL HART—POSSE POISON

A Frontier True Story

By BUCK RINGOE

Stranded in the turbulent boom-town Southwest a desperate girl turned to the outlaw trail. Cursed by baffled badgemen, her name became frontier legend—Pearl Hart!

LOOKING furtively about them, two riders slowed their horses to a walk at the mouth of a shallow, rock-strewn draw, riding into the brush. Here they halted, their horses blowing hard, and listened tensely. The stage trail from Globe to Phoenix swung past this masked hiding place, its route marked by a wavering,

snaky track of mud and sand and deep ruts. The stage was coming. It was not yet in sight, but the waiting pair could now hear the distant grinding of the wheels in the sand and the telltale hammer of hard-driven horses.

One of the two riders, a man with a dirty, hang-dog look to his fuzzy face, turned to his companion—a woman. She might have passed in a moment of excitement for a slim, wiry young man. But for all of her male attire and the grim, determined gleam in her eyes, she was indisputably a member of the so-called weaker sex. Her name was Pearl Hart, and in one calloused, work-worn hand she was gripping a .38 Colt's six-shooter.

Pearl said nothing, only watched the man. She was slight, pale-cheeked, faded looking. She wore a man's shirt, trousers with suspenders that made her narrow shoulders unnaturally square, and a broad brimmed Stetson was pulled down on her head to cover her hair and shield her eyes.

"Comin'," mumbled the man beside her, a fellow known in the mine camps of Arizona as Joe Boot, but whose name it was said was really Josephus Booth. "She's a'comin'." He motioned with a big, long-barreled Colt's .45, adding, "We'll make a killin', Pearl, m' gal. This here coach's totin' gold an' mail, so they tell me."

Pearl Hart made no answer but edged her horse nearer to the edge of the trail and the oncoming Globe stagecoach. Then she spoke. "What I want is ready money, Joe," she said. "What'll we do with gold? We'd git caught with it an' then—" She shook her head with a look of wild desperation in her haunted blue eyes.

BOOT motioned again, furtively, getting a tight rein on his ragged, sweat-streaked mount. "Here she is, gal!"

With the words, he spurred his horse swiftly out of the brush and directly into the path of the rolling, rocking stage. Pearl followed his example, dashing into the open. Their six-shooters barked, aimed over the heads of the driver, bullets whistled past the coach. Boot yelled fiercely, "Hands up, thar. Stick 'em up high, mister!" At which he grabbed the lathered bridle of the off-leader.

The man on the box and his surprised guard were caught completely off watch. The first dropped the lines to grab them between his knees; the guard let his Winchester fall into the trail beside the wheels. Four hands reached for the sky.

"Go ahead, kid," snapped Joe Boot to Pearl. "Git the stuff!"

Pearl slid boldly from her saddle and, leading her horse with one hand, her ready six-shooter threatening with the other, commanded: "Pile out you, all hands, an' make it pronto!"

Driver and guard hopped down from the seat, and there was a scramble from the stagecoach door. Three figures emerged cautiously, muttering. The first was a big, rough, angry miner, the second a "fancy gent" or dude, and the last to appear was a Chinaman, with long pigtail dangling from beneath his oversize black hat.

"What's c-c-com-in' off h-heah?" demanded the miner.

"It'll be yore head, mister," growled Boot, pointing his gun at the man's Adam's apple. "You keep yore mout' shut an' yore paws up, an' nobody'll git hurted. Go ahead, Pearl, git their shooters fust. I got 'em covered."

Pearl lined the men up beside the stage and frisked them for weapons. "Ain't a gun on 'em no place, Joe," she called. Joe shouted back at her, "Look in the stage!"

In the coach Pearl found two big Colt's which she grabbed eagerly. "Smart, ain't-cha, gents!" she crowed, handing a .44 to Joe. The other, a .45, she kept herself, shoving it down inside the waistband of her trousers.

"Hurry up an' search them fellers!" bawled Boot anxiously.

The miner yielded the most, close to four hundred dollars. The dude and the Chinese added a few dollars. Boot saw the fistful of money and suggested that each be given one dollar so they would not be broke. Pearl handed out the dole. The driver and guard had only a couple of dollars between them and this the bandits generously refused to take. Then Joe Boot waved his six-shooter and told the men to climb back into the stage. He motioned Pearl away from the vehicle. She mounted her horse and drew off, awaiting Boot.

"Don't nobody try no sneakers," warned Joe. "Git movin' pronto 'r yuh'll git somethin' in yore eye an' it won't be dust."

The stage began to move with the sud-

den leap of the six horses under the driver's crackling whip. Joe Boot and Pearl Hart dug heels into their horses and raced away in the opposite direction, cutting sharply for the broken country eastward. In a flash the stage guard was down from the coach and running back for his overlooked Winchester. Dropping to one knee he opened fire on the flying bandits. A bullet screamed between the pair, close to Pearl's shoulder. Boot swung in his saddle, jerked his horse clear of the woman's, and let go with his six-shooter. The miner tumbled from the stage, swearing lustily, waving a gun he had hidden in the coach. He began running futilely after the bandit team, firing rapidly, but the pair had the start and were going over ground that made them poor targets.

As Pearl disappeared over a ridge, she flung a last slug at the angry victims and she and Boot vanished.

THE big miner, who was afterward recognized as a gent known as Carrizo Charlie—he who had provided the bulk of the bandit loot—came storming in a fury back to the coach. He was shouting that it was the damnedest thing he ever saw in his life. Pair of fools. He'd recognized the woman as Pearl Hart. In fact, now that the driver and the others recalled the matter, there had been no apparent effort to hide the identity of either robber.

"Hell!" roared the miner, fuming. "Ain't no question. She's Pearl Hart. She's been cookin' in the camps 'roun' here from hell to breakfast. Damn it all, I won't sleep 'til we overhaul them fools. She'll stretch rope same's the damn' fool with her!"

The stage, with its smoldering passengers, soon reached Phoenix, and there the news spread like a flood. Half a hundred irate citizens buckled on guns and ammunition belts, saddled up and swept out of town, heading for the hills where Pearl and Joe had vanished. They were going to cut short the outlaw career of the first lady bandit in Arizona history.

Pushing their already tired horses in a desperate race to find safety in the hundred hills stretching south, Pearl and Joe Boot rode long after sundown, halting deep in the lonesome hills. Joe was jubilant over their success. Pearl was worried.

"Mebbe I shoulda wore a mask or somethin'," she frowned. "One o' them fellers knew me, sure as shootin'. I seen him plenty times over to Mammoth at the mine camp."

"What the hell," laughed Joe, confidently. "We're pullin' our freight—ain't we? Why, we kin head south an' stop the Benson stage."

They were both on edge, afraid to halt long anywhere. Every hour or so they stopped to breathe the horses and listen for sounds of pursuit. The posse, losing not a minute of time, had picked up their trail at the scene of the hold-up and had spread out, breaking up into small groups. Joe Boot, of course, knew the country pretty well, for he had roamed it for some years. Joe made the trail and Pearl rode with him until the two of them were about ready to fall from their saddles. Neither had eaten a bite since morning.

Unfortunately for the pair, there was a fair moon that night and the posses, even better acquainted with the region than was Boot, were hot on their tracks, swinging a wide loop to head the two off, to herd them into a pocket in the hills. They saw the trail cutting around Mammoth, and one of the hunters, a man named Frost, remarked that they must be chasing a couple of Apaches who were running like wolves.

Pearl and Joe soon began to hear the hammering hoofs of swift-ridden horses. The hills made thunder of the sounds. First they came on their left, then behind them. Suddenly a shout rang out on the night directly in their path. Joe cursed, again and again, swinging their course first this way, then that—dodging, doubling, climbing up hills and scuttling down. They rode like a pair of Comanches, driven by fear, haunted by the persistent sounds of the man-hunters dogging their every move.

Finally, near dawn, their mounts stumbling badly, Boot discovered a dark canyon that offered a hide-out. Pearl and he groped their way into this, leading their spent horses. The two crept deep into the black crevice, and they fell exhausted to the ground, holding to the reins of their horses, neither speaking. They had eluded the posse. Or so they thought.

But the angry night riders, furious at the thought of being tricked by a pair of amateur bandits, stuck to the snaky trail, and before Pearl and Joe had lost con-

sciousness they were jerked from sleep by their snorting horses. The animals, scenting their kind coming from opposite directions dragged the man and woman from their sleep.

Boot rubbed his eyes, shook Pearl from her lethargy. Then he heard the coming horsemen, heard them riding into the dark, warily, heard the voices of men calling to one another softly. "We've got 'em now," he heard a man say. "They're in here certain, an' the other bunch is comin' through to meet us. Look out fer yore shootin'."

There was just a slim chance and Joe Boot took it. The canyon might be blind, or it might open into a broad valley. He urged Pearl Hart along, listening intently for sounds of men coming the other way.

"We're trapped," he whispered to Pearl. "There's a bunch comin' to meet the others, but we'll keep movin'. They're afraid to start shootin'."

Through the pitch black of the canyon depths the two bandits dragged their horses. The sounds of more horsemen became plainer. Men behind them, and now men in front of them. Boot chose to keep walking toward the riders farthest away. Then his horse stumbled and snorted loudly, making a noise like the snarl of a bear. A six-shooter barked. Boot called to Pearl to mount. The two of them, desperate, rode like demons, smashing through the brush and over rocks. The canyon rumbled with the thunder of gunfire as the bandit team made a frantic ride to escape. Boot heard a gun fired three times quickly some distance ahead of them. A signal? He swung his horse, dragging Pearl's by the bridle, turned left—for here the darkness seemed to widen, the canyon to spread out. He knew in a flash that he had swung into a fork, one of those strange formations of the land.

"RIDE!" cried Boot to Pearl. "Ride 'em till they fall under us, gal." And they did. Guided by some blind instinct, watched over by the goddess of Chance, the two bandits had picked the tine of the fork that gave them a new chance for freedom. Behind them in the gloom of the high walled canyon they heard the muffled sounds of horsemen, the wild shooting of pistols and rifles.

Cut off from their escape southward toward Benson, the two hounded bandits were being driven north and east. Joe Boot, however, slow-witted as he was, soon realized that pure blind luck had led them safely out of the posse trap. He pointed to a long, shadowy jumble of rocks and burnt-over stumps, and urged Pearl to follow him. Across a limitless rock ledge they rode their staggering horses to let themselves be swallowed up in a darker wood. In the heart of the woods the pair fell from their mounts, listening. The sounds of pursuit seemed to have died completely. They had baffled the possemen.

"We kin hole up here, gal," declared Boot. "Them fellers got us rounded up like a couple o' coyotes. Got to rest these hosses, anyways."

Pearl Hart scarcely heard him, for she was asleep. Boot also was soon dead to the world. How long they slept they could only guess, for it was dusk when they first stirred. They were both stiff and cramped, famished and with parched throats. Boot led the way through the woods, cautiously, until they came to the edge of the timber on a long slope. With a start they discovered that their mad flight had swept them back to within a few miles of Mammoth. Both were known there. Pearl had been a miners' cook there. They could see the little lights of the straggling mining-camp street.

Boot said he was afraid to go into the camp for grub for fear he would be recognized. Pearl agreed. But what were they going to do?

"We can't just starve, Joe," she mumbled wearily.

"We won't." Joe swore, shaking his head. "But look, gal. I know a place back up here behind the camp where's a lot o' caves. We kin hide out in one o' them, while we figger out some plan."

The woman was too tired to argue. She followed Boot along the slope, the two groping, stumbling, dragging the half-dead horses. Boot finally halted and pointed. "See them black holes 'long thar? Caves!"

She didn't see, but she tagged along, leaving her horse where Joe left his. Boot crept like an Indian until they reached the first of the blacker voids in the hillside. Here he drew his six-shooter and peered inside, sniffing, listening. "Might be some miner keepin' batch quarters," he thought.

Suddenly, Pearl felt the man before her stiffen, freeze.

Boot took a backward step, and Pearl glanced over his lowered shoulder, gasping. They saw the twin gleam of blazing eyes and then came an ear-splitting explosion—a hiss that crashed the silence like a bolt of lightning. Boot fired, dodging backward with Pearl from the hole with powder fumes stinging their nostrils and eyes.

"Big cat!" growled Boot, when they got their breath. "Painter."

When the beast ceased its thrashing, the man crawled softly in the hole and lit a match. The panther was a huge female, and Boot shuddered as he came back to Pearl. "Lucky fer us," he grumbled, "we didn't go to lay down in thar."

"I ain't sleepin' in none o' these caves," replied Pearl, still trembling at their narrow escape.

The two faced each other there in the darkness of the mountain night. Boot shrugged, striving to bolster up the courage and strength of Pearl, though he himself was at his wits' end. There was no sign, no sound of the posses, but Joe knew they were there, all around them, on every trail that criss-crossed the hills.

"I'm goin' to make a try fer the camp," he said, and she knew he meant Mammoth, down there with its tiny lights blinking. "If we kin git somethin' inside o' us, we kin hold out 'til they gits tired o' runnin' in circles."

She nodded dully. "They'll ketch yuh, Joe. Yo're known!"

But Joe was determined. Half way down the hill he left Pearl in a clump of brush with the two horses. Alone, on foot, he crept toward the Mammoth mine camp. Darkness gave him cover and he drew slowly close to the edge of the single street, so close that he could make out a cluster of horses and men. The men talked excitedly and one made sweeping motions. Joe crept nearer, listening.

It was one of the posses, sure enough, and Joe's face fell. His hunger was driving him mad, but what chance had he against so many? Even if he could get into the store, the cry would be raised and they would riddle him with bullets.

Even as he crouched there weighing his chances, other posses were combing the hills and mountain trails all the way from the Apache Range to the Santa Ritas. Word of the stage robbery had been carried from Phoenix to all nearby towns and hamlets. Every little rancho and mine camp had been notified to be on the watch for the two bandits—one of them a woman, Pearl Hart, ex-cook and slavey at sundry boarding houses from Phoenix to Tucson.

JOE BOOT shook his head finally and turned away. Those men in the street were evidently preparing to mount and ride his way. Joe began to run quietly up the slope. When he reached the hidden woman he was breathless, and empty handed. Pearl stared at him silently.

"Posse," gasped Boot. "I seen 'em in the camp. Don't make no sound, gal!"

The two peered from the brush at the camp below, heard the clatter of hoofs and saw a group of dark figures leave the town. Joe could tell by the sound of their running feet that only part of those horsemen had come this way. They had split up, no doubt. For a long while he waited, saying nothing to the woman beside him. He felt like a rat in a hole. Every man in Arizona was hunting him and the woman. When the sounds of horses and the voices of men finally died away to nothing, he grunted something to Pearl and slipped off down the hill again. Hunger was driving him to desperation.

Twice that night Boot sneaked up to the edge of Mammoth camp, while Pearl hung back, waiting impatiently. They had cash money in their hands but they were facing starvation. Terror was making frightened masks of their faces. Twice Boot came away, scared by sounds in the night and the movement of men about the camp. Lights began to go out in Mammoth and the sounds of life quieted. Joe Boot started again for the store, his gun in his hand. He was going to get food, or die amid black powder smoke.

How he managed, whether he bought, begged or stole the grub and the tobacco he returned with, no one ever bothered to find out. But the man and the woman crawled back into a sheltered spot in the woods and cooked themselves a meal. After that they slept, undisturbed by the faraway sounds of men in the saddle and

men afoot who were scouring the hills for sign of the trail they had lost.

Next morning Pearl and Joe set forth cautiously, searching the land from wooded heights, dodging mounted groups of riders they made out circling the region. At a creekside they found a little rancho where Joe Boot boldly bought a good feed of oats for their weakened horses. Here also they made another cook-fire and ate.

"Mebbe we got 'em licked," ventured Boot as they hunkered at their fire—stomachs full and Joe smoking his pipe. "Ain't heard ary a sound fer couple hours, gal."

Pearl had fallen into a sort of stupor from the heavy meal. She lay back and fell asleep without a word. Boot grunted and dozed off, contentedly, soon dreaming of a dashing career as a bandit chief with Pearl as his sidekick.

It was Pearl who awoke first. Something had warned her. She felt they were being watched, that eyes were fixed on them. She peered around anxiously, searching the brush and trees. She heard the munching of their horses, turned, saw Boot and his hairy face, motionless.

With a start she was conscious of a dread sound—like the click of a trigger. She turned slowly, raised her squinting eyes, and shrank with revulsion. There, scarcely fifty feet from where they sprawled, perched in a climp of stunted chaparral, were a dozen or more hideous vultures, their long scythe-like beaks clicking in grisly anticipation.

"Joe," she called softly. "Get up, Joe." She leaned over and shook the snoring Boot frantically.

"What's the idear, gal?" demanded Boot, blinking and grabbing his six-shooter. She pointed to the waiting scavengers. Boot raised his gun, then lowered it. He did not dare to shoot for fear that the posses might hear. So he got up painfully and picked up a rock which he hurled at the ugly vultures. Flapping lazily, the creatures rose into the sultry air.

"We'll git goin'," grumbled Joe. "Come on. Ain't far now to Benson, I betcha."

Once more they were on the move, traveling like a pair of hunted jack-rabbits. Rain began to fall, and before they had ridden a half dozen miles they discovered fresh tracks of a mounted party going the same way. With an oath Boot swung to the right. The change in direction sent them around the shoulder of a big hill and brought the rain full in their faces, drenching them to the skin. But they kept on grimly with their horses splashing and floundering through the downpour.

Boot cursed the rain bitterly until the realization of what it might mean to them in their flight eventually dawned on him. If it kept raining their trail would be washed out while they were moving. If the rain stopped, their trail would be hammered like so many arrows carved into rock, pointing the way they had gone. Joe began to talk to himself, muttering, hoping it would keep raining, soaking him and gluing him to his squeaking saddle.

PEARL HART urged her stumbling, worn horse along, her face strained with fear, pleading for the animal to stay on its feet. At last, when the beasts had stumbled a score of times, Boot's mount falling once to throw Joe into the mud, Pearl declared that they had better be on the lookout for a couple of fresh horses.

Joe shot Pearl a look of dismay. "A hoss thief in these parts, gal, stretches rope! Robbin' a stage is jes' plain robbin', but stealin' a hoss—I ain't got the knack fer it."

"Oh, yuh ain't, ain'tcha? An' where'd yuh git these two hunks o' buzzard-bait, Mister Boot? Bought 'em, I reckon!"

"I never said," hedged Boot, wiping his dripping face. "What's eatin' yuh?"

"Nothin'," snarled Pearl and the two fell silent, their haunted eyes probing the timberline, searching every gap in the hills, They were gradually bearing south again, encountering no fresh signs of posse riders. Suddenly Pearl turned to Joe and informed him that she'd had a bad dream during the night and wanted Joe to make her a promise. "You gotta take an oath, Joe."

"What fer," grumbled Joe, looking at her streaked face strangely.

"I dreamed we both got captured," said Pearl, hollowly. "They put us in the penitentiary an' I was in a little cell no bigger'n a grave." She kneed her horse closer to Boot's and stuck out a wet, dirty hand. "We ain't never gonna let 'em take us alive, are we, Joe?" she demanded

earnestly. "We'll fight to the last shot. Shake on it, Joe?"

"Why shore, Pearl! Shore!" agreed Boot. "We'll make a fight that 'll give 'em talk as fur as Santa Fe—mebbe back East."

And they shook hands on it, solemnly—never be taken alive to be sent to prison.

Thus, sworn to die with their boots on, Pearl Hart and Joe Boot rode their staggering horses through the rain, hoping against hope that they had eluded the ever-increasing posse drive, which, at the very moment they had made their death pact, was closing in slowly but determinedly about the chain of hills and valleys down which the bandit pair traveled.

There were men from Phoenix, from Globe, and from Mammoth. Scores of them, formed into small mounted groups, were fine-combing the mountain region, and as the hours slipped by—two nights and the second day almost spent—the tempers of these men became hotter, boiled over. Then sputtered angry curses on themselves for being tricked, and on the bandit pair for stretching out interminably what had at first looked like a little jaunt.

Pearl and Joe had not seen trace of more than a lone horseman all afternoon as they fled down the San Pedro valley. They were on their way to freedom! All day they had led the man-hunters a merry chase, and a wet one. As the sun went down and darkness crept over the valley, the wind rose to a howl like that of a coyote pack, and riding became more difficult. Boot was afraid they were getting lost. But they kept moving, tormented by every small sound that came to their ears.

It was almost dawn when the pair stumbled from their drooping horses and crept into a gloomy canyon mouth. Here, without fire or food, they lay down and fell into a deep slumber in their soggy clothes. And it was here that Pearl Hart and Joe Boot were awakened a few hours after sunrise next morning by the loud snapping of the brush and the sharp, distinct voices of men.

"Hey, you two!" barked the boldest voice. "Come alive there, an' git yore paws up!"

Pearl and her companion were jerked from sleep on the instant. Pearl made a grab for her six-shooter. Then Joe and Pearl saw the big black muzzles of rifles and six-shooters staring them in the eye—only inches away. The posse was practically standing on their feet. "No, yuh don't!" growled a man. "Git them hands up an' empty, or we'll fill yore hides so heavy yuh'll never walk. Stand up!"

Boot arose, shivering, completely beaten. Pearl, dumb with terror and remorse, stared unbelieving. What about the fight they were going to make? They'd been captured like two babes in the wood!

"Come on," ordered the leader of the swiftly gathering posse as men began arriving on lathered horses, shouting, yelling, "Swing 'em up!" They were dragged toward the horses of the law pack—caught with the goods and not a shot fired. There were perhaps fifty men in the party, men from all parts of that corner of Arizona—miners, ranchers, freighters, and men from the towns. They looked at the man and woman with varying degrees of interest, curiosity and anger.

And when, after Pearl and Joe had been lodged in jail at Tucson, these two learned that they had been captured barely twenty short miles from Benson, they, too, were mad. They had almost made it. At Benson they might have jumped a train and made a clean getaway. Now it was the "pen" for Pearl Hart and her whiskery sidekick.

BECAUSE the jail at Tucson was better equipped to house a woman, Pearl Hart was kept confined there awaiting her trial. Boot, however, was promptly taken to Florence. The whole country buzzed with excitement over the case of these two, for it was the first female bandit the state had ever had. People rode in from miles away to have a look at the gal who had gone wrong. Pearl, seeming deeply penitent, assured her jailer that she intended to be a model prisoner.

The jailer believed her until one night shortly before the date fixed for the trial. Going to Pearl's cell on his nightly tour of inspection, he found no Pearl. But there was a neat hole chipped out of the adobe wall.

"She's escaped!" shouted the jailer, rushing from the cell. He ran into the street, shouting, spreading the alarm.

The news quickly spread through the city. Posses were swiftly organized, and parties of irate citizens, armed to the teeth, swept out across the countryside. They were sure they could overtake her quickly, for nobody had seen any woman leave the town mounted. Less agile townsmen rushed toward the jail and into it for a look at the empty cell. One of these, more persistent than the rest, found a worn table knife beneath the crumbling hole in the wall. The jailer swore at sight of it. The crafty female had held it out and hidden it when her supper dishes had been returned to the keeper. With this knife she had picked her way to freedom.

The jail was surrounded by a huge crowd, men shouting, "Pearl's escaped! She hacked her way out with a knife." Mounted men swept through town, yelling directions, bellowing maledictions on the daring woman outlaw.

A small party of riders came galloping back into town past the railroad station. One of these, who came to be known ever after as Eagle Eye, cried to his companions and swerved his horse suddenly. A shadowy figure was moving along the wall of a squat 'dobe building, going toward the railroad station. Eagle Eye made it out to be a woman and he pointed it out. The riders whipped out six-shooters and covered the ghost-like figure while Eagle Eye climbed down from his saddle and began walking cautiously toward the wall, gun in hand.

"Stick 'em up!" he called as he came within a dozen feet of the figure. He saw her move a hand, as one reaches for a belt-gun. Eagle Eye pulled back his hammer with a click and said, "Don't yuh move 'r I'll have to let yuh have it."

At that he saw two arms raised. He moved toward the woman and his partners booted their horses closer, watchful. "You Pearl Hart, ain'tcha?" demanded Eagle Eye.

"Shore," came the reply, with a note of chagrin. "Come on an' git me. I ain't heeled."

Eagle Eye stepped up to her and nudged her out of the shadow where they could all see her. It was Pearl, all right. And she didn't have a gun, not even a knife. Instead she was very meek and crestfallen, for she had nearly reached the railroad. Fate seemed to be against her.

In triumph the horsemen led Pearl back to the jail, through the gaping crowd. She was put into another cell. And from then until her trial she was fed with a spoon. At her trial she presented a pitiable picture of wretched womanhood and motherhood, telling a long story of her sorrow-strewn life in an affort to win acquittal. The thought of a peniteniary cell seemed to terrify her.

The records of the court show that she was born Pearl Taylor, in the town of Lindsay, Ontario, Canada. The date is supposed to have been about 1871. When she was seventeen she met and eloped with a tin-horn gambler named Hart. He proved to be a bum and a wife-beater. A couple of years with him drove her to flight, and she found herself in Trinidad, Colorado, with a baby son.

"I did the best I could," pleaded Pearl tearfully, "for myself an' the baby." She said she did cooking and laundry work and house cleaning and whatnot, leaping from town to town, until one day in Phoenix she ran head-on into Hart again. Hart claimed to be reformed, and the pair, with their small son, set up housekeeping once more.

The attorney appointed to defend her made the most of her sad tale, disclosing that there had also been a baby girl born, that she and Hart had fought and separated, time and again, until, when the Spanish war came along, Hart ran off and joined McCord's Rough Rider regiment. After this Pearl became a mine-camp cook, sending her two children to her mother in Canada.

"But what," demanded the Arizona prosecuting attorney, "has all this got to do with robbing the Globe stage at the point of a gun? The woman became a bandit. Nobody forced her to it!"

THERE were many in the crowded courtroom who were impressed by Pearl's story of a misspent life. The court was touched when finally it was claimed that this poor mistreated girl-wife had only held up the stage in order to secure money with which she could rush to the side of her dying mother.

"Five years in the penitentiary," was the sentence handed down. Pearl Hart's

pale face faded to a dead parchment shade. Five years in "the Rock," as the rock-hewn prison at Yuma was known.

Joe Boot, on the other hand, heard words that made him an old man as he stood there. "Thirty-five years!" A lifetime in the blazing hell of the Rock.

Neither Pearl nor Joe spoke a word to the other. They were led away separately. For a time both were forgotten by the swiftly growing young empire of the Southwest. A year or two afterward, in response to pressure from a group of soft-headed citizens, she was pardoned by the governor.

WHEN she walked from the Rock, Pearl disappeared like a wraith. Some old-timers say she boarded a train and went east, others that she got a horse and a gun and rode for the San Simon valley then known as the stronghold of a tough gang of rustlers and smugglers.

This should have been the last of Pearl, but it was not. Border history shows that Pearl did not go east, that some three years later when a gang of masked riders held up and robbed a train on the A. & N. M. near Stein's Pass, one of the bandits looked suspiciously like a woman. Word quickly got around that it was Pearl Hart, that she had joined the bad bunch. Some said she was the boss of a robber band of her own.

George Scarborough, New Mexico sheriff, picked up the rumor and led a posse to hunt down the lady bandit from Arizona. The trail led him to the then wild town of Deming. A few inquiries indicated a faded 'dobe shack as the abode of Miz' Hart. The sheriff, a hard-boiled gent—who in his day had tackled many a bad man with notches on his gun—left his posse in Deming's leading saloon to quench their thirst. Alone, he went to the 'dobe and rapped on the door.

He heard a soft step, a sound like the sliding of a drawer, and he rammed the door open, his six-shooter covering a figure in man's clothing. One hand of this figure was half-out of a drawer in a chest. The hand held a six-shooter.

"Drop it," ordered the lawman. "Put down that gun, Pearl Hart."

For a moment she stared at him angrily, undecided. Scarborough laughed easily, lightly, motioned with his Colt's. Pearl let the gun fall into the drawer and said, "What do you want in here, anyway, you—"

Scarborough, a powerful, easy-going fellow smiled. "I'm escortin' you to the calabozo, Pearl Hart, in connection with the Stein's Pass train hold-up. Come along peaceful, lady, an' we'll get it over with."

She had no alternative. The sheriff had the situation in hand and her move had been too slow. So she went along to jail, where, after some delay during which not a man was able to identify her as one of the bandits, she was finally turned loose once more.

This time Pearl really did disappear. No one ever saw her again, ever heard of her.

However, it is a matter of record that almost twenty-five years after this affair at Deming, an elderly woman appeared in the sheriff's office at the Pima Country jail in Tucson. She asked to be allowed to see the jail, and, when the puzzled sheriff asked her why, she said quite calmly that her name was Pearl Hart and she wanted to have a look at her old cell. A very unusual female.

TOMAHAWK RENDEZVOUS

A Novelet of Buckskin Warriors

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

Forest-runner Jared Cleve staked his life as traitor bait to snare the Redcoats' craftiest weapon—the Tory spy-master, Belcast!

AUTUMN had come to the hills along the Hudson, so that a smoky mist hung over the rolling ramparts that fringed the stream. Axes rang sharply in the woods around the clearing that flanked the fortress of West Point, and a white dust rose to the knees of the logging teams that snaked the felled

logs back to the fort. There was as yet no hint of Benedict Arnold's treachery, in that autumn of 1779, and thousands of men were working to turn this rebel stronghold above the Hudson into an impregnable fortress.

Three men lay in a clump of bracken across the river from West Point, cautiously parting the reddened leaves with their hands as they peered across at the sprawling log ramparts of the fort. Two of them wore the green uniforms of Tarleton's Tory militia, the third was apparently a farmer in homespun. The horses of the two cavalrymen were hidden in a hollow well down the eastern slope, guarded by a trio of wary-eyed troopers in Tory green. It was unusual for a patrol of Tarleton's to be ranging this far north, even along that troubled eastern bank of the Hudson, and the Tories were alert for any sign of rebel cavalry.

"So that's the rabbit-warren that Mr. Washington is building to hold the middle river!" one of the green-clad officers muttered. "Sir Henry would certainly like to know its strength and dispositions."

"They keep it too closely guarded," the farmer said.

The farmer was a stocky, round-faced man named Giles Creighton, whose pale blue eyes were always watering slightly at the corners. He was continually wiping them with one frayed holland sleeve. There was farmer mud on his boots, and grime on his hands, but a close observer might have noticed that his palms were not quite as calloused as was customary with a legitimate frontier farmer in that grim and hard-bitten age.

"It's too closely guarded for me to get in and sketch the bastions," Creighton added, "but I expect my discontented soldier friend to bring me out the plans tonight. If you give me the ten pound I had to promise him."

"You'll have the ten pound," the Tory officer snapped irritably, "But are you sure you can trust this man Cleve?"

"As near as I can tell," Creighton said. The older officer, who bore the insignia of a captain on his faded epaulettes, spoke for the first time.

"Cleve is all right. Really dissatisfied, and ready to desert the Rebel army unless he can make enough money by working for us within the lines. Belcast sent that word through."

"Belcast sent word!" Creighton's round face was startled, and a sudden sly gleam came into his watery eyes. "I'm complimented, gentlemen. . . . that the greatest secret agent in His Majesty's forces has verified my own observation! But just who *is* Mr. Belcast?"

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you," the officer grunted, beginning to crawl back down the brush-strewn slope. "There are probably not five people outside of Sir Henry Clinton himself who know who Belcast really is, and it's just as well for his safety. The Rebels would give a whole regiment to kill or capture him. Come on, leftenant, let's get away from here before some Rebel patrol comes along and blunders into us."

ACROSS the river, on the edge of the raw and stump-dotted clearing to the west of the fort, a company of infantry of the New York Line were stripping the branches from newly felled trees. Tunics laid aside and sleeves rolled up to their brawny elbows, they lopped steadily at the branches with their axe heads flashing in the sun. A lanky youth, whose tow-colored eyebrows were twin smears of white against the red of his weathered face, momentarily laid aside his axe and went to a wooden piggin of brook water that stood near by.

"Zooks!" he panted, pushing his dusty cocked hat to the back of his head and drinking the water in long gulps, "I thought I enlisted in this army to carry a musket and fight the Bloody-backs, but all I do is cut trees and dig ditches!"

"And so say I!" snapped another man in sudden anger, driving his axe into a tree trunk and letting it stand there with handle quivering. "The officers who command this post are a pack o' fools!"

There was a sudden silence. The first man's complaint had been voiced with a wry good-humor, the sort of grumbling that has been the privilege of the soldier ever since the first leader of the cave-men gathered his club-bearing fellows into a group and formed a crude army—but the second remark was different. It had the ring of bitter conviction.

Jared Cleve, sensing the disapproval of his fellows, stared around him defiantly. His lean and craggy face was almost Indian in its sun tanned hue, as were his heavy black eyebrows. Then his grim mouth twisted in a sneer.

"All right, go on and stare!" he snapped. "I've had nothing but abuse and ill treatment since I joined this army after the battle of the Chemung. May the Devil fly away with the whole lot o' ye!"

"Listen, younker!" A new voice broke in, as a grim old sergeant walked slowly forward with his thumbs hooked in his broad girdle. "I fought the Monseers and Indians with Sir William Johnson in '56, and I marched with Michael Cresap when he led the first riflemen to the siege of Boston four years ago. I've seen more sojerin' than you'll ever dream of, and I say that this sweat an' digging is more important than the powder and lead itself. Now, harkee!" One stubby finger reached out to tap the younger man on the chest. "Ye've been making noises like a half empty teapot for the past fortnight. One more such remark, and I'll ask the captain to trice you up to the whipping post while I lay a hundred lashes on your back myself! D'ye understand?"

"I understand," Cleve said tonelessly. He plucked his axe free from the tree trunk and returned to his work, but his eyes smoldered with a sullen fire.

At sunset the garrison of West Point was drawn up on the parade ground. Grim and powder-blackened veterans of four years of war, they stood in even ranks in their faded blue and buff uniforms while the bugles rang out with their brazen challenge and the flag crept slowly down the tall staff. The ceremony of Retreat! It has always gripped fighting men, symbolizing as it does the unity of the armed forces of a whole nation, and the gaunt faces of these men were alight with a momentary exultation. Only Jared Cleve remained sullen and dispirited, a mood so evident that several noticed it and shook their heads in weary disapproval. Cleve had been popular when he first joined the regular forces after marching as a civilian scout with Sullivan's campaign against the Iroquois the summer before, but recent weeks of brooding had turned him into a sharp tongued misfit. When someone spoke to him as they all broke ranks at the conclusion of Retreat, he shrugged his shoulders and stalked off without answering.

AT the end of the third hour of darkness that night, the sentries at the fort were beginning to yawn and to think about their relief. They kept good watch at West Point, even though there could not be any British or Iroquois within miles except for lurking scouting parties, but they were not expecting trouble. So it was that they did not notice a dim shape creeping from shadow to shadow as it moved toward the outer lines and the dark countryside beyond.

Jared Cleve moved with the infinite patience and caution of the forest-runner he had once been. Born on Schoharie Creek in the Iroquois country and accustomed from infancy to rove the woods with friendly Oneidas, he could lie motionless for fifteen minutes on end when it was necessary and then dart like a catamount from one patch of shadow to the next. He made his way unseen through the double ring of sentries, and at last he was trotting easily down a wood road that the logging parties had cut parallel to the river.

Three miles from the fort, Cleve slowed down to a cautious walk, and at last he came to the rim of a clearing. No light showed therein, nothing moved, but when Cleve gave the call of a whip-poor-will three times he was answered by the eerie voice of an owl. He walked out into the clearing.

"Creighton!" he said softly, and the stocky farmer's voice came back.

"Aye, here am I. That you, Cleve?"

"Did you think it was the King?" Cleve snapped. Creighton chuckled, and his chunky figure loomed through the starlit darkness.

"Did you bring the sketches?"

"Aye, done on paper as best I could. Don't look for the handiwork of an artist."

"So long as they show the guns and the emplacements and the numbers of men, they can look like hen's tracks, for all I care," Creighton said. "Here is the money."

Two things changed hands, a roll of paper and a handful of coins. Cleve felt each coin carefully, running his fingers over both sides before he was satisfied, and jingled them in the palm of one hand.

"Right," he said. "Tell me, who is Belcast?"

"That's something I've been trying to find out myself. But why do you ask?" Creighton's voice was sharp with curiosity. Even in the starlight he could see Cleve's shoulders move in a shrug.

"Just wondering. The talk back at the fort is that a man named Belcast is the heart and brains of the whole British spy service."

THERE was a momentary pause. Cleve again jingled the coins in his hand.

"Well—I'll pull foot and get back before I'm missed," he said. "Get in touch with me soon and let me know what else you want—as soon as you're ready to pay good money for it." Cleve jingled the coins twice more, and started to turn away—and then it happened!

A harsh challenge came from across the clearing. A rifle stabbed the night with a tongue of yellow flame, the bullet whistling past as someone deliberately fired high as a warning, and an instant later the whole starlit clearing was full of the shadowy shapes of running men.

The two spies leaped for the shelter of the forest, instantly separating in the darkness. The whole clearing became a confusion of shouting men and tumbling shadows, with an occasional shot ringing out. When it quieted, Creighton had escaped in the melée, but Jared Cleve was a prisoner in the grip of two brawny Continentals.

"I heard the whole thing," said the officer in command, his face a grim mask of doom. "I heard him turn over the sketches, and he still has the money with him. A drum-head court martial will make short work of you, Cleve."

When the prisoner remained stubbornly silent, the officer shrugged and turned to his men. "There'll be work for a gallows-building detail tomorrow. All right, lads, tie his hands and bring him along."

Jared Cleve sat in a bare hut that was unlighted except for the faint starlight coming in the open window, sat on a stool on the splintery puncheon floor with his shoulder resting against the log wall. His wrists were tied behind his back with rawhide thongs, and his ankles were similarly lashed together. Now and then he caught a faint glint of starlight on a musket barrel as a sentry went past outside the window, and once he heard voices, as an infantryman off duty paused beside the sentry for a moment.

"Hear ye've got Cleve in there," the newcomer said. The sentry grunted sourly.

"Got 'im dead to rights, too. He'll swing tomorrow, have no doubt about that."

"And a good riddance, by the eternal!"

The visitor spat in the dust and walked on, the sentry resumed his slow beat. It was growing cooler as the night passed, and the air had a definite scent of autumn. Jared Cleve sighed, and leaned his head back against the clay-chinked logs of the wall behind him.

Many things were going through Cleve's mind. He was thinking of his childhood along Schoharie Creek before the war, of how he and Rob Miller and a young Oneida named Black Eagle used to set twitch traps in the rabbit runs above the willow bottom, of how quiet it always used to be in front of his father's cabin at sunset when the forest rampart grew scarlet with the after-glow. Old days! Rob Miller and Jared's own father now lay alike in shallow graves in the forest, and the wilderness had already taken back the desolate and fire-scarred clearings that surrounded the ashes of the Cleve and Miller homesteads.

The war had changed so many things! Jared Cleve had never expected Tryon County and the northwest frontier to be converted to a bloody battleground where already nearly half the population had been either killed or driven away. He had never expected to see the day when the locally prominent men who had been his father's friends, and should have been the leaders of the people, the Butlers and the Johnsons and the others, rode the forest with blood on their broadswords and painted Senecas trailing at their heels. Well, for that matter, he himself had never expected to be dealing with Tory spies and to find himself now jailed as a

prisoner under virtual sentence of death!

Suddenly, something blacked out the stars that were visible beyond the cabin window—the head and shoulders of a man. It had grown very quiet now, so that the lagging footsteps of the sentry rang loud in the night as he paced to and fro in front of the hut, but this newcomer made no sound. A single eagle's feather was bound to his scalp lock. Then he drifted silently on, and was no longer visible from the window.

Jared quietly turned his head and looked out through the open door of the log shed. From where he sat, he could see the swift and deadly action that followed a moment later. He saw the sentry pause in his pacing, and drop his musket stock to the ground with a dull thud, and lean on the muzzle for a moment. The man yawned, and stretched, with the gesture of a bored and weary man waiting for his relief. At that moment a dim shape appeared behind him, a drifting shadow in the night. There was no outcry at all. Merely a few seconds of silent struggle, the thud of a muffled blow—and then the sentry had crumpled to the ground. The Indian bounded into the hut with his long knife gleaming in his hand.

The rawhide lashings fell away from Cleve's wrists and ankles. He stood up, and stretched his stiffened limbs, and rubbed his wrists to restore the circulation. The Iroquois saluted him with upraised arm.

"*Koue,* my younger brother!" he said in the Oneida dialect. Cleve replied in the same tongue, with the easy facility of one who had learned it in childhood.

"*Koue,* Black Eagle! It is good to see you. I knew that you would come."

"A WOLF of Tharon never fails when one of his brethren calls." Jared Cleve grinned in the darkness. Already he was beginning to feel better, after the strain of the past few hours and the dragging monotony of his recent weeks of garrison duty, after the drudgery with pick and axe and shovel. He was a forest-runner at heart, never a man intended for the cramping discipline of garrison life. Well—all that was over now.

They stole out of the shed, past the sprawling body of the sentry and through the silent encampment to the outer lines. Just at the end, Cleve's luck failed him a little, for a sentry caught sight of two dim shapes sliding through the gloom. Yellow flame split the night as he fired, but the bullet whistled past, and a moment later the pair of fugitives had lost themselves in the gloom of the forest.

In a distant clearing, Cleve at last paused to get his breath. There had been a crackle of additional musketry as they ran through the trees, and it was possible that the officer of the watch had sent a patrol out to look for them with lanthorns, but he was not afraid of pursuit now.

"It was well done, Black Eagle," he said. "I hope you did not hurt the sentry?"

"Not seriously, my younger brother. His head will ache when he awakes, but that is all."

"After weeks of preparation for this night, we had to give one sentry a headache," Cleve said.

It had been a carefully laid plan, a scheme known only to three men. General Putnam who commanded at West Point, Black Eagle the Oneida scout, and Jared Cleve himself—they were the only three men who knew that Cleve's steadily growing rebelliousness had been merely a pose. They could have arrested Giles Creighton when he first approached Cleve, of course, but they were after bigger game than the heavy-set Tory farmer. They wanted to strike a blow at the heart of the whole Tory spy system—at the unknown and mysterious man who called himself Charles Belcast.

The trap was now ready and baited. With Cleve definitely established as a traitor to the American cause, caught red-handed and under sentence of death, he might be accepted into the Tory inner circle. And, if there happened to be any British spies among the garrison at West Point, they would have sent out word that Jared Cleve's treason was the real thing and no mere pretense. They would have no way of knowing that the plans he had sold were prepared under General Putnam's personal direction.

"And now what trail do we follow?" Black Eagle asked. He was a tall figure

in the night, his paint gleaming faintly in the starlight.

"I'll go to Creighton and tell him of my escape," Cleve said. "You let him see you in your Mohawk warpaint, then slip away at dawn before he has a chance to guess that you are really an Oneida. As for me—" Cleve's voice became as harsh as the rasp of a file, "There's a charred clearing on the Schoharie that I have to avenge! I'll find this man they call Belcast, or I'll not be back."

TWO weeks later, a pair of men were moving along the trail that led north to Cobleskill. They were dust-covered and travel-worn as they trudged along the narrow trace through the autumn colored woods, and both men carried light packs, from which hung jangling bunches of rusty traps. As they came to the banks of a small creek, the shorter of the two dropped his pack and sat down on a log.

"Let's set awhile," Giles Creighton said. Cleve shrugged, and dropped his own pack.

"Suits me," he said.

Creighton took a short pipe from his pocket and began to fill it, and Cleve felt a certain grudging admiration for the other man's adaptability. Just as the fat Tory with the watery eyes had given a convincing appearance of a frontier farmer in his earlier operations, across the river from West Point, now he looked like any other backwoodsman starting out in the early fall to pick his ground for autumn trapping. The pair of men, in their worn buckskins, were just the sort of wayfarers that might be seen along any Tryon County forest trail at this time of year.

"What dc we do next?" Cleve asked. Creighton's fat, unshaven cheeks bellied in and out as he sucked at his pipe.

"We'll visit the Mohawk River forts and size up the garrisons," he said. "Mr. Belcast particularly wants to know how many militia and other forces are stationed in each, now that the harvest is in."

"What about this Belcast?" Cleve said irritably. He pulled his hunting knife from its beaded sheath and began to peel the bark from a birch branch. "We've been doing good work for the man. Why don't we ever get to see him?"

"Mebbe we will, soon." Creighton's watery eyes were calculating. "I'd sort of like to meet up with him myself. Tell me—what became of that Mohawk who got out of West Point that night?"

"Cananga? He was hungry for the smell of powder. You know how the varmints are." Jared Cleve's hands were steady as he peeled the bark from the broken branch, but he quietly watched his companion for signs of dawning suspicion. "He went off to join Brandt, and hunt with Butler's Rangers."

"I'd feel better if he hadn't left us so suddenly," Creighton said fretfully. Cleve shrugged.

"I don't trust him entirely, any more than I do any Iroquois, but he did save my life that night."

A girl came out from the thickets along the creek, a girl of about twenty who wore a ragged linsey-woolsey coat over her calico dress. The short hair that showed beneath the blue kerchief on her head was the color of corn-silk. A heavy dragoon pistol was carried in a beaded buckskin holster at one hip.

"Howdy," she said calmly, but Jared noticed that her hand had momentarily gone to the butt of the pistol at her belt. He stood up and pulled off his fur cap with a flourish.

"Howdy, ma'am!" he grinned, liking the girl's level eyes and self-reliant air. "Name of Tom Brown. This here is George Hall. He's not as bad as he looks, behind that there crop of whiskers."

"I'm Ruth Jacobsen," the girl said. She had not laughed at Cleve's foolery, but he thought that her eyes were friendly. "You boys striking out for some fall trapping? Come up to Pa's cabin and have a bite."

"We'll be right honored, ma'am," Cleve said, picking up his pack. Creighton hesitated, looking vaguely annoyed, but then he picked up his own pack and followed.

They threaded the narrow trace in single file till they came to a clearing but then, as they crossed a field toward a cabin of hewn logs, Cleve moved up beside the girl.

"Isn't it dangerous for you to go that far from the house alone?" he asked. She smiled.

"I guess not. Folks say the Iroquois won't raid any more till spring."

"That's what they all said at Cherry Valley!" Cleve warned. The girl touched the heavy gun at her hip.

"I know how to use this."

CLEM JACOBSEN was a tall, gaunt frontiersman with a craggy face tanned the color of old leather. He was carrying a rifle when he first peered out the door, but he left the weapon behind when he stepped out over the log sill.

"Ye're just in time to come in and set and have a bite with us," he boomed. "And there's room up in the loft for both of ye to sleep tonight."

"We don't want to put you out any," Cleve said. Jacobsen brushed the objection aside with a sweeping gesture of one hairy hand.

"Not a bit. Matter of fact, we're a mite lonesome here since my boy Nate went off to fight at Stanwix with Marinus Willett, and we'll be glad of the company."

The two newcomers carefully leaned their rifles against the logs beside the door and went to wash at a wooden bench that stood against the wall. There were two basins, and a bucket of water, and a bar of home-made soap. As Cleve filled the basins and hung his fur cap on a peg driven between the logs, Creighton spoke from the corner of his mouth.

"What's got into you? I don't want to stay here. It may be dangerous."

"Listen," Cleve muttered in the same low tone, "You may be a good secret agent, but you don't know these frontier folk like I do. This is Tryon County, the border country, and its not like the Hudson River counties further south. Nothing would make these backwoods people more suspicious than to refuse to stay over at this time of day."

The interior of the cabin had the same stark simplicity of all of County Tryon's frontier dwellings. A splintery puncheon floor . . . a pair of pole beds in the corners . . . a few pieces of home-made furniture . . . shutters heavy enough to withstand rifle fire and pierced with loopholes—the picture was always the same. In this case, as visible evidence of the fact that Clem Jacobsen and his family were settled folk who were making a go of fighting the wilderness, calico curtains had been hung to screen off the two beds, while a row of pewter plates was propped on top of the log mantel.

Clem Jacobsen sat at one end of the bare wood table with his gray-haired wife at the other, while Ruth sat on one side and the two visitors faced her. Creighton was mostly silent, his eyes on his plate of bacon and greens and corn-meal cakes, but Cleve and the settlers were exchanging the gossip of the trails. They were half way through the meal before Jacobsen asked if the newcomers had seen any signs of Iroquois as they came along the trace.

It was the inevitable frontier question, a question that was always asked but that never became perfunctory, and Cleve saw the farmer's wife lay down her fork as she waited for a reply.

"Yes," he said slowly, "We saw Seneca moccasin tracks a few miles down the trace."

"Seneca? Are ye sure?"

"Certain," Cleve said. He saw a shadow pass across Ruth Jacobsen's blue eyes, and her gray-haired mother sat slowly back from the table.

"I was sure I saw a trace of smoke in the hills beyond the meadow this morning," she said.

"Nonsense. It was only a bit of autumn mist," Clem Jacobsen rumbled absently. Then, before anyone could speak again, there came a new sound—the thudding hoofs of a galloping horse!

There was an intangible note of alarm in the staccato sound of those plunging hoofs. Jacobsen pushed back his chair with an oath, and they all ran to the door as the rider came in sight. A sweating and mud-covered militiaman on a badly blown horse, riding without a saddle and with one hand twisted in the mane, he clattered across the clearing and half turned as he went past the cabin.

"Tories in the valley!" he shouted hoarsely. "Johnson is raiding with a hundred men. Get to the fort at once!"

THERE was a momentary pause when the rider had gone, plunging on up the trace till he vanished among the trees and the sound of his thudding hoofs was lost. There was now no sound but the

wind is the trees, while the late afternoon sun struck low across the cornfield. A lonely frontier cabin—and the threat of a border raid! Mrs. Jacobsen's voice was dull and bitter as she spoke.

"So it's hatchet and scalping knife again!" she said. "Why can't they leave us alone?"

"It's a good strong cabin!" Jacobsen said stubbornly. His wife suddenly clutched his frayed sleeve with tight fingers.

"Clem! We talked all that over before. Think of Ruth! You promised we'd go to the fort, not try to fight it out here!"

"So be it," Jacobsen said, but his shoulders sagged as he ducked his gaunt head to pass under the low door frame.

There were a few, confused moments of hasty preparation. Jacobsen filled his powder-horn from a flask that stood on one of the shelves, and slung his heavily laden shot-pouch over his shoulder. The unfinished dinner dishes remained where they lay on the table. The two women gathered up the pewter plates from over the mantel, and lumped some other cherished possessions together into a pair of light bundles. Then they moved outside, Jacobsen closing the door and pushing the latch string back through the hole. He glanced at the ruddy and sinking sun.

"We'll make the fort before dark if we move fast," he said dully. "Let's pull foot."

They moved out at once, Jacobsen taking the lead with the two women close behind him, and the pair of "trappers" bringing up the rear. Cleve looked back just as they reached the edge of the forest, looked back at the neat clearing and square cabin that now stood deserted and somehow forlorn, but the Jacobsens did not look behind them at all. As they moved up the trace, Creighton sidled close to Cleve.

"Let's get out of here," he muttered. Cleve shook his head.

"It would give us away completely, and we'd never dare come into County Tryon again. We're in this now, and we'll have to stick it out."

It was a silent, furtive journey in the gathering twilight. Their feet padded swiftly on the hard-packed ground of the trace as they wound through the trees in grim haste. Frontier women were hardy in those days—they had to be to stand the life—and neither Ruth nor her mother had any trouble keeping up with the men. The only word spoken on the entire journey was when the dull sound of two cannon shots came drifting through the forest from somewhere ahead, and Jacobsen glanced momentarily back over his shoulder at the others.

"The alarm guns at the fort," he said. "Word of the raid has reached them."

The sun had already gone down behind the western rampart of trees when they reached the raw clearing that surrounded Cuyler's Fort, but the sky was crimson with the afterglow and a murky twilight swirled around the logs of the stockade. It was only a two-story blockhouse with a small yard attached, was Cuyler's Fort, but to the people of this part of the valley it was the one chance of safety. The sunset glinted on rifle barrels above the stockade, and on the weapons of half a dozen militiamen who stood outside the open gate.

Several other groups of refugees were plodding across the bare, stump-studded clearing toward the fort. The men carried their rifles at the ready and looked ever back over their shoulders, the women trudged along, with bundles in their arms and children clinging to their skirts. A small patrol of men in buckskin was strung out across the clearing, warily watching the woods and calling to the fugitives to hurry.

Clem Jacobsen came to a momentary halt, leaning on the muzzle of his rifle and pulling off his broad-brimmed hat to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"We're in time," he said. "And I reckon we're nearly the last in. Our cabin's about the furthest from the fort of anyone who has a chance of getting here."

Jared Cleve was watching Creighton, and he found a certain grim pleasure in the other man's signs of obvious nervousness. The fat Tory's unshaven face had gone pale under its grime, and he was plucking at his loose lower lip.

GILES CREIGHTON was finding that it was one thing to plan Indian raids from a safe distance, but quite another thing to find himself in the middle

of one—and on the side of the defenders.

"Guess we'd better get inside the stockade," Cleve said.

A sudden shout rang out from across the clearing. Atop the stockade, they could see the head and shoulders of a man silhouetted against the sunset as he shouted the warning and then flung his musket to his shoulder. The muzzle spat flame in the twilight. An instant later, with shrill yells and an uneven crackle of musketry, a long line of men burst out of the woods and charged across the clearing toward the fort.

Jared Cleve flung his long rifle to the level and fired. Then, as they ran across the clearing, he reloaded with furious haste, trying to keep himself between Ruth Jacobsen and the oncoming raiders. There were Tories in the green and buff uniform of Johnson's Greens in that group, and a handful in the black of Butler's Rangers, and several score of painted Senecas and Cayugas. The militiamen outside the stockade were herding the last refugees through the log gate which now stood ajar only enough to let one person slip through at a time. The thin skirmish line of backwoodsmen was falling back before the onslaught but taking a heavy toll as they went. Bodies were beginning to dot the clearing. Then the loopholes of the blockhouse and the whole top of the stockade swam in smoke as the militiamen fired by volley.

It took perhaps thirty seconds for the Jacobsens to run across the clearing to the gate, but it seemed an eternity. A small group of Cayugas painted in red and yellow nearly cut them off at the end, but Cleve dropped one with a quick snapshot and Ruth coolly shot another with her long-barreled pistol. As another Iroquois leaped for the girl Cleve grappled with him, and it was hunting knife against war hatchet. Then a gaunt frontiersman came up to drive the steel-shod butt of his rifle in the Cayuga's face, and they all slipped inside the gate of the stockade.

The shadow of the epaulment lay all the way across the enclosure, and the inside of the stockade was filled with a murky dusk. For a moment Jared Cleve leaned panting against the log wall, then he sheathed his knife and began to reload his rifle.

"You're wounded, Tom," the girl said, and for the first time he became conscious that warm blood was running down the side of his face from a hatchet slash over one temple. He continued to reload his rifle as the girl hastily bandaged his wound with a strip of cloth. Then Cleve looked up as the tall figure of another man loomed before him.

"Jared!" the man said, and his voice was harsh and rasping.

At the sound of the name, his own name that was now a badge of shame along the whole frontier since his supposed treachery at West Point, Cleve looked up sharply. The man before him was a gaunt, grizzled forest-runner who towered well over six feet and whose unusually long arms hung nearly to his knees. Long John Randall!

Cleve's brain was clicking at top speed. Of all the people who knew him by sight and that he had risked meeting when he came north with Creighton, there was the least chance of fooling as old a friend as Randall. There was only one thing to do.

"Name of Tom Brown, stranger!" Cleve said, his eyes never leaving the forest-runner's grim and hostile glance. "You must have me mixed with someone else. Let's go up on the firing step together and get in the fight."

LONG JOHN RANDALL'S eyes were still cold as chips of gray flint, but he stepped back and nodded toward the ladder. Creighton turned away with the Jacobsens then, and with a sigh of relief Cleve climbed the ladder that led to the firing step along the top of the palisade. Randall was close at his heels, and as soon as they found a vacant spot along the stockade one of his big hands closed on the younger man's arm like a vise.

"Talk. And talk fast."

Hastily, in muttered phrases that were scarcely audible above the noise of the firing, Jared Cleve told his story. He sensed a slow lessening in the tension as he talked, and at the end the frontiersman's hand fell slowly and grudgingly away from his knife.

"I'd like to believe ye, younker!" the older man muttered. "For the sake of the trails we've traveled together in the past. We'll let this wait till later, but—at one

sign of treachery—I'll put a bullet in your head if it's the last thing I do."

The firing around the embattled blockhouse had quickened to a steady drum roll. The attackers had taken cover now, but from behind each stump and hummock their rifles twinkled like fire-flies. The firing step of the stockade was crowded with militia and settlers, standing tensely at the loopholes as they fired, or stepping back to reload. Below, within the enclosure of the logs, half a dozen cattle were lowing and trampling in panic while a group of boys fought to control them.

"Nearly dark—they'll lose heart," someone said, but a stock forest runner spat down in the mud below.

"Full moon tonight—and it's clear," he said, and his ramrod rattled in the barrel as he reloaded.

There came a comparative lull as the last crimson faded from the western sky and full darkness enveloped Cuyler's Fort. Desultory firing continued from the outer darkness, with the defenders aiming at the flashes in reply, but both sides were waiting the rising of the moon. Now and then one of the fort's two small brass carronades, set in the upper story of the blockhouse, went off with a dull crash and split the night with a burst of ruddy flame.

"Those things may scare the varmints a bit," someone said with grim humor. "Otherwise it's a waste of good powder to shoot them at night."

Jared Cleve left the firing step and went inside the blockhouse to refill his powder-horn. Half a dozen candles gleamed on settles placed in the center of the big room, candles stuck to the table-top with a few drops of wax apiece, and a boy was paring bullets with a hunting knife as they spilled still hot from a mold, pausing from time to time to lick his scorched fingers. On the hearth a fire of pine knots glowed and crackled where two men were melting more lead in an iron cooking pot.

Though the pressure had eased for the moment, some men were still firing from the loopholes along the outer wall. Their shoulders jolted backward from the shock of the recoil whenever they fired, and thin streamers of powder smoke drifted in the loopholes till the whole interior took on a misty appearance. A wounded man was propped against the logs of the far wall.

RUTH JACOBSEN arose from where she had been crouching beside the wounded man and came slowly across to Jared, tucking the pale hair up under her blue kerchief again. Her calico sleeves were rolled up to the elbows.

"How's your head?" she asked.

"Fine. I forgot all about it."

"You saved my life out there."

"I wouldn't say that, ma'am," Jared said. "It was all pretty wild and confused for a few minutes."

Cletus Cuyler, a stocky gray-faced man in the faded red and brown uniform of the Tryon County militia, came in from the open yard. He took off his cocked hat and his wig, and wiped the sweat from his bald head with a red handkerchief.

"I've set a crowd of women and boys to fillin' every keg and pot and piggin and noggin in the place with water from the well," he said to no one in particular. "The varmints may start using fire arrows before the night is over."

As the moon came up, the sound of the firing quickened in a steady crescendo. The pale moonlight made aim uncertain, and the besiegers were steadily drawing closer to the stockade as they crept from stump to stump. Twice they tried to rush the gate with a log for a battering ram, and were beaten off by the keen shooting riflemen at the loop-holes. Jared Cleve fired and reloaded and fired again, till his rifle barrel grew hot to the touch.

Going back in the blockhouse for a fresh supply of powder, Cleve found an informal council of war in progress. Cuyler was perched on the rim of one of the settles, his wig askew and his face worried, while half a dozen frontiersmen leaned on their weapons beside the hearth.

"We're fairly well supplied and can hold out for several days with luck," Cuyler said. "But I wish I knew if our messenger got through to the north. If the Schoharie militia march to our aid, we'll be safe."

"I know all these trails as though they were my own pasture," Cleve said. "I'll try to get through with another message."

"And I'll go with you," someone spoke at his elbow. It was Giles Creighton. Cuyler nodded.

"You two trappers should be a good pair to try it. Go ahead—and God keep you!"

The two of them hesitated at the back angle of the stockade, where the moon threw the shadow of the blockhouse far across the clearing, and there was a shallow gully to provide some cover most of the way to the woods. Cleve carefully reloaded and primed his rifle, then made sure that war-hatchet and hunting knife were secure in their sheaths. Creighton spoke quietly.

"This is the first smart idea you've had today. It's our chance to get away and out of this mess. Take one of these. . . ." He pulled a brace of short-barreled pistols from under his hunting shirt and gave one of them to Cleve. "An extra bullet may mean the difference between death and safety before we get clear."

Jared thrust the pistol in his belt. He fastened a knotted rope securely around the top of one of the pointed logs that formed the palisade, and dropped the coil outside. He slung his rifle on his broad back.

"Here we go—and luck be with us," he muttered.

On the two far sides of the fort, the defenders suddenly quickened their fire to create a diversion. Cleve climbed up to the serrated top of the log wall, threw one leg over, then slid down. As soon as he hit the ground below he unslung his rifle and waited, crouching, until Creighton slid down beside him. The deep shadow on this side of the fort, deeper than ever by contrast with the moonlight that filled the rest of the clearing, shielded them both.

They found the gully and began to crawl along it.

THEY had not far to go to the edge of the woods, in actual distance, but it took them the greater part of an hour. Inch by inch—they slid along on their bellies, hugging the ground in the center of the shallow gully, occasionally sliding through an inch or so of water. Cleve went first, and before he moved forward each precious yard he ran his questing

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by BILL COOK

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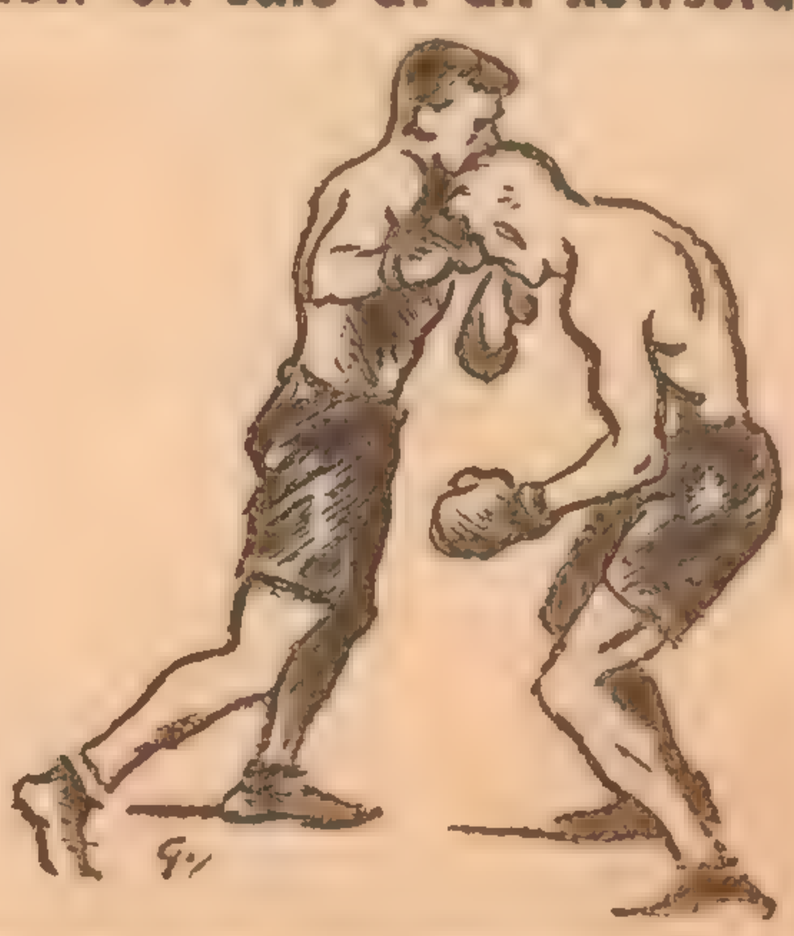

hands carefully over the ground ahead to remove any twig or pebble or autumn leaf that might make a noise and betray their passage. Twice they saw Senecas silhouetted against the sky near at hand as they slunk past from cover to cover, and once they lay motionless and scarcely breathing for a full seven minutes while a pair of Tory militiamen took cover and fired at the fort from a stump a scant three yards away, but at last they came to the darkness and shelter of the woods and dared to rise to their feet.

When at last Cleve and Creighton paused, it was on the rim of a willow bottom where the trees were open and the moonlight struck down in a shaft of pale light. Both men were panting as they leaned on their weapons, and the sodden and mud-caked front of Cleve's buckskin hunting shirt was chill as it clung to his chest.

"Here we are," he said.

"A minute more," Creighton panted. "I am heavier than you, and little used to running."

The Tory spy's breath hissed sharply through his teeth, and his shoulders had the droop of a man who is unutterably weary, but at last his chest moved normally once more.

"What a night!" he muttered. "Well, we're well out of it. Let's get as far away from here as we can before morning."

"I'm going on to the Schoharie," Cleve said.

Creighton gaped at him.

"What! Have you gone daft?"

"Listen," Cleve said. He knew he was skating on thin ice, but it had to be done. He knew the importance of his pose as a traitor and a British agent but, on the other hand, he could not let those people back in Cuyler's Fort be massacred for lack of help. It might still be possible to combine the two. "Listen here Creighton! My quarrel is with the Continental Army and the stupid fools who run it, not with these poor folk along the frontier. I'll obey the orders you and I received from Belcast the spy-master to find out and report the strength of the border forts, but first I'm going to tell the Schoharie militia to go to the relief of Fort Cuyler. And, if you're wise, you'll come right along with me. It'll make us stand in better with the folks in this part of the country than anything else we could possibly do."

"You think too much of trying to make a good impression on these people. I am sick of it." Creighton said. He took a step or so back, and the moonlight fell full on his face. He still leaned on his rifle, but there was a quiet menace in his heavy figure.

"I order you to forget this mad idea of trying to warn the militia, and to continue quietly on the mission that brought us here."

"You order me?" Cleve sneered. "You're wasting your breath, my fat friend. I take orders from no one but the elusive Mr. Belcast, wherever he may be."

"I am Belcast, you fool," Creighton said, and his voice was quietly menacing. "Having two identities has been a good safeguard. But I *am* Belcast, and I order you to turn away with me at once."

Jared Cleve took a long breath. He might have known that this man who called himself Giles Creighton, who had with equal ability played the parts of a frontier farmer and a backwoods trapper, and had doubtless played many other parts in his time, was too clever a man to be merely the small cog in the machine that he had pretended. So this scowling man who faced him in the moonlight was Belcast. . . . His own mission had come to an end! Swiftly he pulled the short-barreled pistol from his belt and cocked the hammer with one horny thumb, aiming the small but deadly weapon at the other man's chest.

"Drop your rifle!" he commanded, "You are under arrest — in the name of the Continental Congress!"

Cleve expected one of several things at that moment. He expected either a grudging surrender, or a sudden panic, or perhaps even a swift attempt to fight. None of these happened. Instead—Belcast began to laugh!

IT was not a pleasant sort of mirth, that chuckling laughter of the Tory spy in the moonlight. There was both mockery and malice in it, and it seemed a strange thing to come from a beaten and captured man. Vaguely uneasy, Cleve tightened his grip on the pistol.

"You are a fool," Belcast said, and his own hand darted toward his belt. With an oath, Jared pulled the trigger. The hammer fell, the priming flashed in the pan, but there was no report. And then Jared looked into the muzzle of the other man's pistol!

"You are a fool," Belcast repeated. "Suspecting you, and thinking that something of this sort might happen, I gave you an unloaded pistol when we stood there by the palisade. But *this* one that I kept is loaded and charged."

JARED CLEVE sighed. In that perilous frontier, where every weapon was kept loaded and primed at all times, it had never occurred to him that the pistol thrust into his hands on the firing step of the stockade might be unloaded. He had simply inspected the priming, and then thrust it in his belt. That had been his mistake—and it was going to be a fatal one. Even in the moonlight, he could read his death in Belcast's watery eyes.

It was not alone the knowledge that he stood on the threshold of death that set Jared Cleve biting his lips in helpless anger. That was bad enough, Lord knew, for he found life interesting, and there was a war to be won, and he found himself thinking of the level glance of Ruth Jacobsen's blue eyes. His own death was bad enough, but there was also the matter of those folk in Cuyler's Fort, who would not now have the Schoharie militia brought to their relief. And all the other harm that would result along the frontier as long as Charles Belcast continued to go his treacherous and bloody way!

Jared was just gathering his muscles for a final, despairing leap when something happened.

A dark shape fell on Belcast from above. A lanky figure in fringed buckskin dropped from the deep shadows of the tree overhead and landed squarely in front of the Tory. Long John Randall! The pistol roared and the frontiersman staggered back, clutching at a rapidly widening stain on his buckskin clad shoulder.

With a scream of insensate rage the Tory drew the long hunting knife from his sheath and started for the intruder who had cheated him of his craftily plotted triumph. But Jared's hand had snaked to his girdle and away again in one swift motion.

There was a brief flash in the moonlight and then a single, gasping cry as Jared's tomahawk bit death into Belcast's skull.

Randall grinned wryly as he plugged his wound.

"Reckon I miscalculated a mite, younker!" he drawled.

Jared Cleve took off his cap and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Long John!" he gasped, "Where did you come from?"

"Wa'al, it was this way." Long John shifted uncomfortably, and ran one hand over his stubbly chin. "To tell ye the truth, younker, I wasn't entirely believing that yarn of yours, and I wasn't trusting either of you two. So I came along behind when ye both left the fort, just to see what would happen. When ye stopped to chin in this clearing, I swung up into the tree—wasn't hard fer an old catamount like me to do it quietly—and waited there to see which way the cat would jump. Ye know the rest."

"I never thought I'd be so glad to see your ugly face!" Jared said. The old frontiersman grinned, and went to retrieve his rifle which he had left behind when he swung up into the branches.

"Let's get goin'," Randall said. "Those folk back at Cuyler's still need relievin', and it's up to you and me to get the boys from Schoharie."

"Don't bleed too much," Jared warned. "I want you as a witness to tell General Putnam that my job is finished."

THE GHOST DANCE

By BUD SWANSON

Here is the true story of the last Indian War—a bloody holocaust kindled in hatred between Red Man and White, and fired by the frenzy of the messianic Sioux Ghost Dance.

FIFTY-TWO years ago the battle of Wounded Knee—the last major Indian war—was fought on the western frontier in December 29, 1890. But it was fought all over again in Washington on the fiftieth anniversary of the battle because of a bill introduced before the congress "to liquidate the liability of the United States for the massacre of Sioux Indian men, women, and children at Wounded Knee." The bill proposes an appropriation of one thousand dollars for

each Indian killed or wounded, to be paid to survivors or heirs.

The battle of Wounded Knee ended almost as quickly as it began in the cold, gray dawn of a South Dakota winter. Historians have never fully agreed as to what happened that morning when a sleepy Sioux camp on Wounded Knee Creek in south-western South Dakota was turned into a shambles within a few minutes.

The trouble really began years before as scores of settlers, seeking new land, pushed steadily into Indian territory. In 1874 gold was discovered in the Black Hills, and hordes of boomers and land-grabbers stampeded into the gold fields. Violation of Indian treaty rights became flagrantly widespread. Abuse of Indian reservations was commonplace. Step by step, mile by mile, the Sioux tribe retreated deeper and deeper into the dark, foreboding hills. Hatred against the white man increased; resentment flared in the red man's breast.

YELLOW BIRD, a Sioux medicine man, called for a council of war.

"The paleface comes with the swiftness of the wind," he intoned in the guttural tones of the Sioux tongue. "Each time we move our tents higher and higher into the hills. Now there is no food . . . our hunting ground is gone. Even the fish have been driven from the rivers because the paleface washes the yellow dirt."

Solemnly Yellow Bird handed each warrior a "ghost shirt," a buckskin garment trimmed with ornate beads, sacred among the Sioux, and supposed to be bullet-proof against the thunder-sticks of the soldiers. The red man had pitched his last tepee. They vowed to move no more.

The climax was reached with a messianic ghost dance, a frenzied religious revival common among the Sioux. Lasting for days and nights, these fanatic dances drove the Indians virtually mad. They war-whooped and shrieked until they dropped from sheer exhaustion, but still the war drums beat their maddening tattoo, the chant of death.

A troop of soldiers from the Seventh Cavalry, on a scouting expedition, passed by the Indian village while the strange rites were going on. They reported the incident to Major S. M. Whiteside, commander of the first battalion of the Seventh Cavalry. Realizing that the dance would mean an Indian uprising if it got out of hand, Major Whiteside immediately ordered a general round-up of the messianic dancers. On the afternoon of December 28, 1890, about four hundred Sioux reluctantly surrendered. The Indians were moved to Wounded Knee where disarmament was ordered for the next day.

About eight o'clock the following morning the disarmament proceedings began The warriors were ordered to come from their tepees and surrender their arms peacefully. They were in a sullen, ugly mood. They came forward hesitantly, and seated themselves on the ground. Obviously they were unwilling to give up their guns. An officer persisted, however, and finally twenty braves entered their tents, returning shortly with only two rifles.

"They're stalling," the officer addressed the troop. "We'll have to do something else. Search the tents!"

He signaled with a wave of his hand. Part of the soldiers moved up to within ten yards of the huddled group of Indians. Another detachment began a thorough search of the tepees. A murmur of indignation ran through the Indian camp as the soldiers entered the lodges. The women chattered in high-pitched voices, and waved their arms excitedly. Babies wailed lustily. The older children ran about in bewildered confusion, a half-dozen mongrel dogs yapping at their heels. The warriors watched stoically, their eyes glittering.

The soldiers found it necessary to overturn beds and remove furniture and other belongings from the tepees in the process of the search. They found about forty rifles, most of which were obsolete and of little value.

Meanwhile Yellow Bird was walking among the warriors, blowing strange noises from an eagle-bone whistle, urging the tribe to resist. He promised the braves that the "ghost shirts" would protect them from the bullets of the soldiers. As he spoke in the Sioux language, the officers did not grasp the dangerous drift of his talk.

Most of the Indian warriors sat on the ground, blankets covering their knees. Already wrought up by the maddening messianic dances and suffering from high ner-

vous tension, they grunted in unison at the fiery words of the medicine man.

A soldier approached Black Fox, fiercest of the Sioux braves, saying he was going to search under the blanket covering his knees. Suddenly Yellow Bird stooped down and threw a handful of dust into the air.

BLACK FOX jerked a rifle from under his blanket. He fired point-blank at the soldier. The soldier fell to his knees, a fountain of blood gushing from his chest.

And then the massacre began!

The soldiers fired a volley directly into the Indians. They were so close their rifles left powder burns on the bellies of the red men. Instantly the braves sprang to their feet, and then the bloody carnage began.

For a few brief moments a gory hand-to-hand struggle took place. There was no time for officers to shout commands. The only thought was to kill or be killed. Not all the Indians had rifles, but nearly all had revolvers. In their belts they carried knives and tomahawks, and many swung murderous war clubs. They fought with the savagery of madmen, slashing and stabbing with dripping knives. Their eyes were redshot with lust and hate, and from their throats burst hideous, blood-curdling shrieks, the primitive war cry of the Sioux.

The dead and wounded were trampled underfoot, and their screams of pain and terror were muffled by the bedlam of the battle.

The Indians broke through the flanks of Troop E, commanded by Captain Wallace. They made a rush for their tepees, getting additional weapons from the squaws, and continued shooting from among the women and children. The soldiers returned the deadly gunfire. The Indians scattered and mounted their ponies. In the smoke of battle, it was hard to distinguish buck from squaw, and many women and children were killed.

And then the army Hotchkiss guns, trained on the camp for such an emergency, opened fire with a thunderous staccato. A fusillade of shells and bullets fell in the camp, ripping it wide open. The guns poured in two-pound explosive shells at the rate of fifty a minute, mowing down every living thing. The tepees were shot down by the bursting shells.

Soon the camp was a roaring inferno of flames and black smoke boiled skyward. There was no time to minister to the dead and dying. The ghastly smell of burning flesh spread across the battlefield.

Shrieking and yelling, the Sioux broke ranks and fled panic-stricken, seeking shelter in a jagged ravine. They were followed by a howling troop of soldiers. The Hotchkiss guns were moved into position and swept the ravine with a raking fire.

Almost as quickly as it began, the fight was over. The dead and wounded littered the frozen ground—two hundred Indian men, women, and children, along with sixty soldiers!

It was the last battle of the western frontier—and perhaps the bloodiest. Certainly no other battle, large or small, has caused more controversy down through the years. In 1917, General Nelson A. Miles, famous frontier soldier, recommended the government to recompense the survivors "for the great injustice done them, and the serious loss of relatives and property."

Today monuments stand at the Wounded Knee post office in memory of the soldiers and Indians who lost their lives in the fight. Unless the United States decides to act otherwise, it is the final mark of recognition on the fiftieth anniversary of the last Indian war on the American frontier.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

WHO SAID A GAL CAN'T FIGHT?

Nancy Ames was no Belle Starr . . . no female gun-toter. But when she saw that road-agent lead was set to blast young Jim Burdett into an early grave some primal instinct in her awoke. Nancy Ames fought for her man.

She fought so well that she got into Deputy Jim Burdett's hair. He who was already plenty busy with Morongo Rim's masked raiders, and a hill-feud that only Colt's showdown could end!

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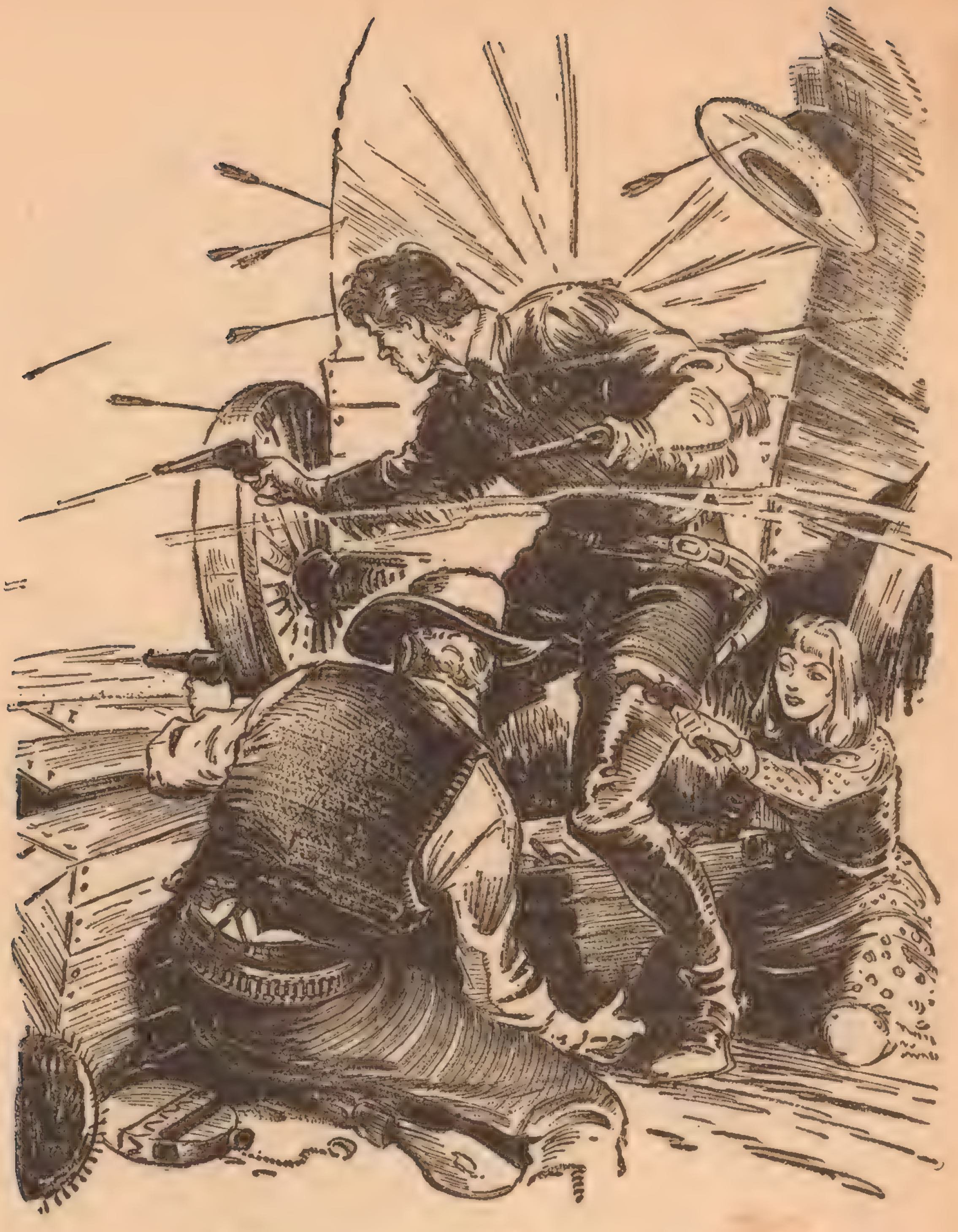
WHEELS OF DESTINY

By MORAN TUDURY

Westward rolled Colonel Colt's fateful wagon. Stubborn Dan Gaffney drove it through Shoshone greed and white man's treachery—only to meet powder-scorched showdown in Death Valley!



A Stirring Novelet of the Overland Trail

DAN GAFFNEY was on his way to Colonel Colt's armory when he saw the wagon train drawn up in the town square. All was hurry, bustle —shouting wagoners, lowing oxen, swaying red and blue hickory-bodied 'Stoga wagons.

Tomorrow the train would move on for the Oregon Trail jump-off at Independence.

Dan wished fervently that he was going with it. He had good reason for wanting to go.

His older brother Matt was at San Bernardino. Dan would have liked to be bringing him a wagon load of Colonel

Colt's pistols. Matt's need for them was desperate. Again and again his settlement had been sacked by Mexican raiders, and his last letter had said, "They're too many for us, and we only got our old single-shots. Last week they burnt my place to the ground. Willy was shot in the leg. We sure could use some of Col. Colt's six-shooters out here. It would make up for there being only such a few of us."

But there wasn't much chance. Getting Colt's revolvers to California would be a long and perilous journey with freight rates sky-high. And right now Colonel Colt's every thought was on something else. This afternoon Dan, who was his gunsmith, was going to shoot his latest model .44 in a test before a U. S. Government inspector. A great deal hung on that test. It would affect the Colonel's whole future as well as Dan's.

His head turned. He saw a spectacle that made him forget everything else.

A girl was playing with a dog alongside one of the emigrant wagons. Pretty with dark hair and eyes, somehow she seemed sad-faced, too. Dan noticed it. Occasionally, she stood still and a shadow came over her face.

Her wagon was isolated from the others. It was as if the rest of the train had drawn off deliberately. He understood why. There was something peculiar about her wagon. The six-mule hitch wore fancy hames and bells, but the wagon wheels were rubber-tired. And on the side of its canvas was painted: *BEWARE — DU PONT'S BLACK EAGLE POWDER, WILMINGTON, DEL.*

THE girl stooped and played with the dog again, and Dan couldn't help smiling. It was quite a dog—and would have been a pointer, except that it was black. That made it plain kiyoodle. But it was just what the sad-faced girl needed to take her mind off herself. It hid under the wagon. When she came to look for it, it sprang out running in furious, dizzy circles. It bumped against trees, leaped under hitch-racks — and finally upset a man who was mending some harness.

Dan laughed. The girl looked up, met his eyes—and blushed. For a second they stood there, held by each other's eyes. She saw a tall, solidly built man of about twenty-five, with tow-white hair and steel-gray eyes. Dan felt his own cheeks growing oddly warm. . . . Then something happened. He heard an angry shout:

"I'll fix ya—ya damn' cur!"

It was the man who had been upset by the dog. A powerful, dark-skinned man about forty. His worn boots and dirty beaded buckskin hunting-shirt made Dan realize this was not his first trip westward. He held the dog by the scruff of the neck, his right hand swinging up with a harness strap.

"Don't! *Please—don't!*"

The girl was running. She seized the man's arm, clung to it. The wagoner stood up, still holding the squirming dog. He threw his arm out, hurling the girl back against his wagon. She cowered there, white-faced.

"I'll learn him!" he cried. "Keep off'n me—you—"

Then Dan Gaffney moved. Two things were dear to his heart—guns and dogs to hunt under them with. As the dark-skinned wagoner raised the strap, Dan grabbed his arm. The man's back was turned to him, and he must have thought Dan was the girl come back. His arm swung out again . . . then he had a disagreeable surprise. The grip on his arm was still there, but vise-like now. His head turned.

Then he cursed.

"Let go that dog," Dan said.

The wagoner went berserk. He released the dog, grabbed for Dan. But Dan stepped back, hands at his sides, eyes quiet, cool. For an instant, the wagoner hesitated. Then, head down, he sprang.

Dan Gaffney laughed. He was the best shot in the county, and now his eye found a real target. His fist darted at it like a bullet from Colonel Colt's new and improved .44 caliber Walker Model. The wagoner's chin shot up. He straightened, kicked backward, and sat down in a heap of manure. He was pretty dazed, shaking his head glassy-eyed.

Dan met the girl's wide eyes. "Better take your dog back home," he said. "He doesn't seem popular around here."

Obediently, she collared the dog. The

wagoner was getting to his feet. A man on the sidewalk spoke to him. "Better lay off Dan Gaffney, stranger," he said, and the wagoner cursed under his breath. Then he shuffled away.

The girl said, "Are you Dan Gaffney? I'm Betsy Jessup. Thank you for saving Blackie."

Dan felt awkward, clumsy again.

"I've tried to keep Blackie away from —from him," she explained. "But it's just his bad luck always to go over there. I'm afraid he'll get hurt—after we get out on the trail."

Handling the angry wagoner hadn't ruffled Dan. But this girl's soft, sad voice left him curiously disturbed. She was the first girl who ever had affected him like that. Every time he glanced at her lovely face, he reddened. He could have kicked himself, but it happened.

"Your folks will look after him," he said.

"Uncle Jube will," she said. "He's all my folks now. Now—since Dad died.

No tears were in her dark eyes but a kind of dull horror that made them unbelievably large. The shadow had come back. Dan was troubled. He had met this girl, talking with her for just these few minutes. Tomorrow morning she was leaving—to put an entire continent between them. He thought of that mysterious tragedy, so recognizable in her sad face. He thought of her in the same wagon train with the dark-skinned wagoner. And he thought of her accompanying that wagon all the way to California. The wagon that said: *BEWARE—DU PONT'S BLACK EAGLE POWDER.*

He felt a little sick. He roused himself, his feelings sodden. It was time to get over to Colonel Colt's armory.

"Good-by."

She looked up quickly. He knew he wasn't imagining it. Her face was startled.

He tried to say something, but what was there to say? He couldn't even take arms to Matt in San Bernardino, who needed them so badly. So how could he hope to see Betsy Jessup in California?

Her hand was held out and he took it, held it.

"Good-by," Dan said thickly. "Good luck."

The girl turned away. And he thought to himself how quickly all of this had happened—and too late. He took a deep breath, as he hurried across the square. There was no time to linger. He was due at the armory.

THREE hundred revolvers—improved by lighter weight and a better catch under the muzzle to hold the rammer lever in place—were stored in this little ramshackle brick building. They represented all of the Colonel's fortune. Because Dan had been his gunsmith for four years, the three hundred revolvers represented Dan's fortune too.

Carefully, he examined the test revolver. The mere touch of it made Dan glow. Colonel Colt had taught him the history of weapons. He knew about them all the way back to Greek fire, the matchlocks—the first ignition set-up of the wheel-lock that had been touched off by a lighted match; Spanish Miguelet lock and the snaphaunce or demi-battery Italian flint-lock. And the revolver in his hand was the flower of all.

Its nine-inch barrel was round with an octagonal breech, the trigger-guard square-back brass. Through the blade and hammer-notch sights a man could draw a split-hair bead. And down that long, glistening barrel six shots unerringly would leap to their mark.

In Dan Gaffney's hand this gun was going to clinch the Government inspector's O.K. and an order for the three hundred revolvers that meant so much to them now. It was, if Dan knew anything about it.

A lot of folks said Colonel Colt was crazy. His first model had been whittled out of wood while on a boat. The Colonel had gotten the idea of a revolving firearm from watching the ship's wheel. He saw how the spokes always spun around in perfect line with a clutch that locked the wheel at any spoke lined up with it.

To get money for his experiments, Colonel Colt had traveled around the country giving public exhibitions with nitrous oxide gas. He would invite members of the audience to come up on the stage and be put to sleep for three minutes. Admission was fifty cents. And after that a lot of folks had called him "Laughing Gas Colt."

But now Dan knew the laugh was on them. Because when the U. S. inspector saw him shoot this revolver—right then was going to mean the sale of three hundred Walker Model .44's.

Shem entered the shop. He was a young fugitive slave from Missouri whom the Colonel had sheltered and bought free. His pride in Colt's repeaters was as great as Dan's.

"I got bad news, Massa Dan."

Dan looked up.

"It's that white man Murdock," the Negro explained. "He's gonna horn in on the Gov'ment test. Yassuh. He's bringin' over a hawss pistol. He says once the inspector sees *his* gun—then he ain't gonna order ours. Yassuh."

Dan said, "I know Murdock's gun. After a few shots, it'll burst in his hand."

"Yassuh," Shem said dubiously. "But you gotta admit it. He sure can shoot off a gun."

Dan did admit it. Murdock was a marksman. But the gun Murdock was touting was no good—something he had picked up from an impoverished Swedish gunsmith. The gun was no more dependable than Ace Murdock himself.

Dan knew all about Murdock. Unlike Colonel Colt, he was no lover of guns. He was a speculator and promoter. From the Pacific Coast and back, Murdock had tried out his money-making schemes—patent medicines, hair oil, even worked the thimblerig shell-and-pea game. At a saloon card table Dan himself had seen the man "crimping" cards and dealing "seconds."

"All right, Dan," Colonel Colt's voice called, and Dan and Shem went out.

The Colonel was only thirty-three but bearded. Curly-haired, bright-eyed, he was a friendly and enthusiastic man. He nodded to the Government inspector, and Dan shook hands.

Across the yard stood Ace Murdock—a lean, restless figure with quick eyes. His black goatee, beaverskin plug hat and long coat made him appear handsome—to people who didn't know him too well. He nodded surlily at Dan.

"Let's get started, boys," the inspector said. "I want two hundred rounds shot at that target. We'll see how your guns stand up."

Colonel Colt's sparkling eyes showed his excitement. Shem was shaking like a cold dog. But Dan's nerves were quiet, steady. He knew what this gun, in its old form, had done for the Texans a couple of years ago. He felt certain about the improved model.

Just for a moment, he remembered sad-faced Betsy Jessup, whom he would never see again. Then he raised his arm and began to fire.

IN his hand, the .44 became a living thing. Its roar and buck almost became rhythm. He reloaded, fired again, and each shot driven into the wooden target made him tingle. When he was finished, the inspector went to work. He measured the penetration. Fouling of the bores had been negligible. No exploded caps had caused obstruction. Deposits in the cylinder from smoke were slight. The inspector nodded as he wrote out his report.

"You got a gun here, Colonel. And—" he glanced at Dan—"you got a magician to shoot it."

Then he signaled to Ace Murdock.

Dan watched the gambler. A cheroot protruded from his mouth. The beaverskin was tilted jauntily over his eyes. His left arm casually bent behind his back. No restlessness showed in Murdock now. He was steady and cool.

He began to fire, his aim perfect. Dan realized it. Shot for shot, he could match Dan Gaffney. Murdock reloaded. Something about the still, slit-eyed figure, sending one shot after another for a bull's-eye, sobered Dan. Was it possible? By sheer marksmanship would Murdock beat him with an inferior gun?

Then the thing happened. On his fourth reloading, Murdock's gun exploded. He dropped it, cursing. His hand was powder-blackened and bleeding. Colonel Colt came forward.

"Too bad," he said. "Here, I'll fix that hand for you."

But the other turned away, scowling. He stood at a water-barrel, his hand plunged in—cursing silently. Then Dan heard the voice of the Government inspector. And his heart leaped because he knew they had won.

"Colonel," the inspector was saying.

"I wish I was Secretary of War. I'd buy me every gun you turned out!"

They stood there, Colonel Colt happy-eyed, Shem hugging himself—Dan feeling his heart pound. Then all at once the inspector's words began to eat into his triumph.

"I'll make my report," he was saying. "Then all you can do is pray. With the Government, it ain't just the gun, Colonel. It's politics and red tape. You're still a long ways off from a contract. I got to tell you that now."

Colonel Colt was silent. Dan knew what he was thinking. About his long struggle to get the Government to buy his revolvers. About the three hundred in the storehouse, still waiting for a government order.

The inspector was speaking again. "Target practise like this is one thing. Gaffney here, for example, is an expert. But it would be better to see those guns used—say out west, in real every-day use. California would be the place. Now that Gen'l Kearny's took Los Angeles and kicked out Flores—hell, the place'll be full of American settlers. Your guns would bring law and order out there. Just let the settlers take up these guns—then the Government would have to buy 'em. The U. S. Cavalry would holler for 'em. The War Department would have to kick in."

The inspector nodded. "Why, look here, Colonel. You get twenty-five dollars a piece here. In California I bet you'd get a hundred. Hell, man—you ought to send a wagon load out there."

At the water-barrel, Ace Murdock turned, stiffened. Dan watched him, then looked at his employer. Colonel Colt's face was overcast. Dan knew that money wasn't his whole aim. Like all inventors, Colonel Colt was something of a dreamer. He dreamed over the future of his guns as Whitney must have dreamed about his cotton-gin, Donald McKay his Yankee clipper ships. Colonel Colt knew well enough what his guns could do for America's western frontier.

But when the colonel spoke, only gloom was in his voice.

"Too much risk," he said. "Suppose my guns—suppose three hundred of 'em fell into the hands of outlaws or Indians? The Army won't give me an escort, you know that. I've got three hundred guns, and they represent my last penny. But I'm not thinking about that now. It's what would happen if those guns fell into the wrong hands. Why, they could equip a criminal army, an army that could terrorize the frontier and wagon trails. It would hold back the frontier ten years."

Colt shook his head. "Another thing. Rival gunsmiths would know what such a trip would mean. I know my guns. If they ever got to California, they'd corner the market. And rival gunsmiths know that." He lowered his voice, and Dan understood why. Ace Murdock was now just leaving the yard.

"There are men," Colonel Colt said softly, "who would kill to keep my guns from getting there. I know. I've had trouble back here before."

Finally, he shrugged, looked at the inspector quizzically. "And where would I find a man willing to take my wagon out there? A man to take such a risk? Some man who had as strong reasons of his own for wanting that wagon to get there?"

IN the silence, Dan Gaffney's breathing stilled. He was no believer in miracles. But if this wasn't one—then what was? He roused himself.

"I'll take 'em, Colonel." He tried to keep his voice steady. "And I got plenty reason. I got a brother out there with a family that needs some of our guns worse'n hell. My brother Matt who took care of me after our folks died. Working in the mills here hurt his health and he went out west—soon as I could support myself. I owe him plenty. Now he's in trouble. He's been burnt out by the Mex. His boy's been shot. That's my reason. If somebody don't get him a good gun then he's going to be wiped out."

The inspector stared. Colonel Colt had stiffened. He started to smile. But no smile came. The inspector slapped his shoulder.

"There you are, Colonel. Now you got a man!"

Colonel Colt looked at Dan. But Dan's eyes were steady.

"He's right, sir," he said. "I'm your man."

The colonel seemed to glow with en-

thusiasm. He took Dan Gaffney's arm.

"This must be fate," he said. "Why, only this morning I had a visit from a friend who's going out west. He wanted me to come, too, and I turned him down. Come on—we'll find him."

Dan and the inspector walked over with him to the town square. They went down the row of wagons, and suddenly Colonel Colt halted.

"Jube!" he called. "Climb out of there!"

Dan, still dizzy with all that had happened so quickly, now was completely stunned. For the wagon had painted on it *DU PONT'S BLACK EAGLE POWDER.* From its depths climbed a short, bald-headed, bow-legged man of sixty. The girl was following him.

Colonel Colt said, "This is Jube Jessup and his niece. He's the best powderman Du Pont ever had. He's got black powder in his ears and has to comb it out of his hair, Jube," he told the old man, "I'm sending Dan Gaffney with you, with a wagon full of my guns."

The powderman snorted. "With your pistols and my powder—say, we'll make Californy a white man's country!" He turned to Dan. "I'm proud to know any friend of Sam'l Colt's. I hope you know guns like I know powder. Powder's playful. It can be tarnation persnickety. Ever seen a mill blow? Well, you got somethin' to see. Once our Swamp Hill mill blowed. It blowed Hank Cooley through four brick walls and printed him up against a pigsty!"

Dan's eyes met the girl's. He saw there the wonder that must be in his own.

"What is it that you're taking to California?" And now the strangeness in her voice sobered him.

"Revolvers," he answered. "Colt's revolvers. The best revolvers in the world."

He saw her shudder. A shudder that shook her entire body. All her surprise and happiness was gone. Her face had been struck dead-white, and she turned away looking sick.

Dan stood there, watching the wagon where the girl had retired. He knew now that there really was a shadow over her life. It had been no imagining on his part. Now, in some way, it had fallen like a barrier between them.

He raised his head. Another thought, fully as disturbing, came to him. It was caused by something that abruptly made him remember Colonel Colt's words, "Men would kill to get hold of a wagon load of guns."

Ace Murdock was standing twenty yards away. It gave Dan a little start to see Murdock talking with the dark-skinned wagoner who had tried to beat Betsy Jessup's dog. As Murdock caught Dan's eye, he laughed shortly. He said something to the wagoner, and they walked away.

II

DUST clouds enveloped Dan. Sweeping backward over the entire length of the slow-moving, two-mile long train, the fine, gagging grains filled his eyes and nose. Week after week, following the south bank of the Platte out of Independence, he had walked his horse through that choking dust. Shem, riding the tongue-mule on the wagon, groaned. But there was no help for it. No relief until they reached Fort Bridger. Then the train would divide—the farmers to Oregon, gold seekers to California.

Dan winced for Betsy Jessup in the wagon that was just ahead. From the start, the Jessups' own wagon and their powder wagon—driven by Jube's hand, Tim—had been ordered to the rear of the train. The captain and council regarded it as too dangerous a cargo to travel in their very midst. Dan had insisted on sharing the Jessups' isolation and dust. He feared for the girl. Her uncle never had a smoldering pipe out of his mouth, and his nips at the bottle were frequent.

"Tain't no risk," the bald-headed powderman said when he observed Dan's apprehension. "You just look here how me 'n' Tim's got it fixed." He showed him the small powder kegs strung on a rope cat's-cradle inside his wagon. "Ain't no knock, and ain't no bounce. Kegged like she lays now, a man could carry this superfine black clear up Pike's Peak."

He winked at his Irish helper—a tough, strapping man of forty. "Tim, he's frettin' 'cause I told him about Hank Cooley, I reckon. Hell, Cooley just plain asked for that mill to blow. Know what he done? He come into the buildin' with hobnails in his boots."

The old man raised his own for Dan's inspection. "Wood pegs. Nails ain't no good in a mill. Nails make a spark. Any time you spark around a superfine black—well, git ready for a funeral by proxy. Ain't that so, Tim?"

The Irishman grinned.

Other worries crowded Dan's mind. Keeping his own cargo a secret was difficult, and Colonel Colt's warning had sunk in. But from the outset he was made uneasy by the inquisitive and prying. He grinned wryly. His refusal to answer questions had only resulted in lurid rumors.

Some hinted that Dan Gaffney's tightly laced canvas concealed moonshine whiskey. A drover asked if it was true his freight was coffins.

His voluntary sharing of the Jessup's tail-end position in the train hadn't changed Betsy's attitude. From the day she had learned he was to accompany them, the girl had avoided him. Occasionally, at meal-time, he wandered over to their wagon. Old Jube welcomed him with an uncorked bottle which Dan refused. But the girl's eyes seldom met his, then merely perfunctorily.

Once, in Dan's presence, her uncle explained, "The gal's been low since her pa was took off, Gaffney. I brung her with me for a change," and her flush, at his words, was painful to observe.

Dan recollected how different had been their initial meeting—when, he would have sworn, she had been stirred by his own instantaneous attraction. The change had baffled him.

The crawling train, its pace retarded by its great length, had come to a halt. Because of its size, it hadn't been considered necessary to adopt the usual overnight circular formation. No Indian raiders were likely to molest this caravan. Four abreast, the wagons were drawing up. The Jessups and Dan, like publicly condemned parias, took position several hundred yards behind the last wagons.

Dan washed at the river, eating the corn meal and jerky Shem prepared. He resisted an impulse to join the Jessups. It hurt to realize that, for some reason, his presence only seemed to make the girl uncomfortable.

For want of better to do, he got out the present Colonel Colt desired to be handed to General Kearny. He was examining it when he felt something pawing his leg. The girl's black dog. Dan tossed it a chunk of biscuit. He was playing with it when he looked up and saw the girl standing there.

"I'd better take Blackie back," she said. "I don't want him—wandering off."

Nettled, Dan said coolly, "He was safe enough with me—that other time."

Instantly, he regretted it. Color leaped into her cheeks. He realized it wasn't indignation but shame.

"I didn't mean it that way," she said in a low voice. Then, as if with an effort, "Why, what a pretty box!"

Delighted at her interest, Dan extended General Kearny's present.

"It's rosewood."

She ran her fingers across the polished surface of the box. He was elated at the pleasure he saw in her face. He loosened the catch, raising the lid. The interior was lined with baize. Its neat wooden compartments contained one Walker Model .44, a bullet mold, lacquered-copper powder flask, box of caps and paper cartridges, and a small combined nipple-wrench and screwdriver. Dan was proud that his own hands had helped in its making.

"It's a presentation case for the commander in California," he said. "Colonel Colt always gives one to—"

His words died at sight of her face. Every drop of color was gone from it. She had backed away, hands thrust fearfully. Never had he seen such revulsion in a human being. Her horrified whisper froze him.

"IT'S murder," she said. "Tools for a murderer!"

Dan flushed.

"My Dad was killed by a pistol," the tremulous voice said. "He was playing cards. He was being cheated. He pulled out his own pistol—but the other man shot him first."

Dan said, "If your Dad had had this pistol, he wouldn't be dead now. Nothing fires faster than this gun."

Anger, hatred leaped into the girl's face making it almost ugly.

"You mean if there weren't *any* guns!" she cried. "If murderous inventors didn't

sell killers' tools! I know you people. People like you trap men. My Dad was crazy about guns. He was always practising. He thought he could shoot better than anybody. If he hadn't had a pistol that night nobody would have shot him!"

Dan swallowed. Unreasonable as was her argument, he tried to understand. Bitterness had completely distorted her thinking.

She was speaking again, voice shaking, "I hoped California would be different—that people would live there in peace. Now you're carrying death and murder to them."

EMOTION halted her. Dan was about to answer when he realized that someone had approached them. He turned and saw the wagoner he had knocked down in the town square.

"I come to beg pardon," the man was saying. "I was too quick back there about the dawg. But we're all in the same train now, an' I don't want no hard feelin's."

Dan studied the man curiously. His section was known by the train as the Jayhawks—six wagons of wild, young, unmarried men whose drinking, gambling, and fighting several times had roused the protests of the train captain and council.

Dan wondered at the heavy, dark skin, almost reddish. Still unshaven, the beard was jet-black but sparse. Dan had the odd impression that his beard could grow no longer. He regarded the soiled hunting jacket so ornately strung with colored beads.

"Hell, I'm a man that loves dawgs," the wagoner said. "I ain't the kind to hurt pore dumb animals. I jest got riled." He bent to pat Blackie, but the dog showed its teeth, backed away, sniffing. The wagoner took off his hat, facing Betsy Jessup. "Ma'am, I axes yore pardon."

The girl ducked her head slightly, then walked back to her own wagon. Dan shared her distrust. There was an artificial humility in this man's words. His liquor-reddened eyes flickered.

"I kinda wanted to shake the little lady's hand," he said.

"That's all right," Dan said shortly. "Leave her alone."

After a moment's silence, the other's gaze narrowed. To Dan the slitted eyes now held a calculating look.

"Goin' to Oregon?" And at Dan's headshake, "or goin' to Californy for the gold?"

"Maybe."

The other grinned, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "Some goes for gold," he hesitated. "An' some brings their gold with 'em. I been west afore. Some brings stuff out from the East and sells it in Californy—for four times as much. That's better than diggin' for gold." He spat with an assumption of casualness. "What'd you say you was carryin' out there?"

Dan answered coolly, "I didn't say."

The man laughed. "That's a fact—you didn't." He moved slightly closer, and Dan felt his own body instinctively stiffen. The man smiled crookedly.

"Mebbe you're carryin' spinnin'-wheels?" he said slyly.

"Maybe I am," Dan answered—and suddenly realized the truth. This was no nosey idler. The man had come here for a purpose. His apologies had only been an excuse. Abruptly, the man leaned over, spoke evenly.

"Mebbe spinnin'-wheels—for spinnin' grave clothes and shrouds," he said and grinned.

Dan stared.

The man said, "Mister, me 'n' the Jayhawks kin use them shroud-spinners o' yourn. We kin use 'em bad. My name—waal, they call me Cactus 'cause I grows short whiskers. You trust Cactus now. 'Cause you'n me is goin' to do some business." He nodded. "I know you got a wagon load o' them Colt's repeaters. Never mind how I know. An' I'll pay you forty dollars a piece for 'em—right here an' now."

He stuck his hand in his shirt, drew out a heavy bag with a leather drawstring. Then Dan Gaffney's expression halted him.

"You ain't goin' to backwater on me, mister?" He laughed. "I know. You're figgerin' them repeaters might fall in the wrong hands. Waal, they ain't. No Injun's goin' to get 'em. I'm sellin' to the Mormons out Salt Lake way."

Dan's expression didn't alter.

"Mister, I'm warnin' you," Cactus said. "That's dangerous freight you're carryin'—for a greenhorn. You don't know this here country like me. I got my Jayhawks to help me run them guns clear to Salt

Lake City. But you an' that black can't. You'll never git to Californy. You better sell while you got the chance."

DAN'S patience was ended. He recollected seeing this man and Ace Murdock together. Either of two solutions offered. Murdock had commissioned Cactus to buy the revolvers and keep them out of the California market until he could exploit it himself. Or Cactus was making a deal for himself and the Jayhawks. Dan was indifferent to either.

"I'm going to California," he said. "I'll take my chances with my freight."

"Listen—"

Both turned.

Jube Jessup had come up.

"Git hitched ag'in, Gaffney," the powderman said. "Cap'n says we're travelin' tonight. The train's fell off some an' we got to make up lost time."

Dan turned away, and Cactus departed. He heard the man's mumbled cursing. It was the last occasion, he imagined, of any pretense of friendliness from the wagoner. He thought of Betsy Jessup, her revulsion for him and his cargo. Colonel Colt was right. Enemies, not friends, would attend his way to California.

He called Shem, and they hitched the mules.

The moonlight, made murky by alkali-swirls, had transformed the train into a blurred and ghostly caravan. Seemingly barren by day, now the plains had assumed an unfamiliar look. Dust-laden mesquite made wan and weird shapes. Distant cow-backed hills no longer were comforting landmarks but grotesque and wavering shadow-bands across the dim horizon.

To Dan's smarting eyes, his own and the two Jessup wagons seemed to be traveling in an isolated world—shut off from the others by considerably more than three hundred yards. Drovers' cries, cracking whips, rumble of sawing, rutted wheels—all was far-off, meaningless.

Astride the tongue-mule, Shem suddenly called:

"What's troublin' that there leader, Massa? Looka how he keeps shyin' an' shakin' his head! Ol' Whizzer sure frettin' 'bout somethin'."

Dan saw a small, wing-flapping shadow skitter across the trail. "Nothing but a road-runner," he answered. "We must've stirred up a snake."

The Negro's eyeballs flashed white in the moonlight.

"Night-ridin' ain't my style, nohow," he complained. "I ain't honin' to start no snakes wrigglin'. An' I ain't wantin' to smack into that powder-wagon—*naw-suh!*" He moaned. "It ain't healthy to mess 'round no powder-wagon in the dark."

Dan made no answer, but Shem continued: "Massa Dan, you better keep yore eye peeled. Plenty white-folks in this here train is hungry for them Colt guns. I hears 'em gossipin' 'round. This train's too big. All the folks in it ain't honest."

Dan said, "Watch your mules, boy."

"Yas-suh, I'm watchin' 'em." The Negro's teeth chattered. "But I'se powerful oneasy, Massa. The witches been ridin' my back. Last night they rid me turrible. I couldn't sleep none. Any time the witches rides me that's a bad sign. It mean big trouble comin', Massa Dan."

Long after Shem's quavering voice had ceased, Dan rode in silence. The jingles of trace-chains, yaw and creak of the wagon, measured *clop-clop* of hoofs grew monotonous. After two months his horse had come to follow the wagon without guidance. Weariness numbed him. Once he roused. The dog Blackie had appeared alongside him, whining. He was so persistent that Dan dismounted and patted him.

"Home, Blackie," he said. "Go on, boy."

He watched the dark shadow disappear into the dust. Getting into the saddle again, he grinned sleepily. Night-travel affected the Negro and Blackie alike and seemed to trouble them. His eyes drooped. He was thinking of his relief when his journey ended. When these guns at last were in the hands that so desperately needed them. He pictured Matt's surprise. . . .

His eyes opened abruptly. He realized he had dozed, and was relieved to see the dust had cleared. The wind must have changed. Then came another realization. Underfoot it was unusually rough. His stumbling horse had wakened him. His head raised—then he started. They were off the trail. Not even the Jessup wagons were in sight. Angrily, he turned to the slouched figure on the tongue-mule.

"Shem! Wake up, you black—"

His voice died. The truth leaped at him. *The man on the mule was not Shem!*

Dan's hand whipped to his holster. But it froze in mid-air. Behind him a man's voice spoke harshly.

"Get yore hands up!"

SLOWLY, Dan obeyed. A horseman moved alongside him and was followed by four others. All were white men—the faces of all half-shielded by bandanas. Their rifles menaced him. The man who had first spoken now asked a question of the one straddling the tongue-mule.

"You fixed the black?"

Dan heard the driver's laugh. "Forgit him! Afore he woke up I had the knife in him."

Dan's first and instinctive guess was wrong. None of these men was the dark-skinned Cactus. Cold fury now gripped him. His nerves were steady as they had been that day testing Colonel Colt's .44. He would hold this wagon and avenge Shem or be killed himself. Though his hands were still raised, his mind was made up. Never would he surrender the revolver at his side.

Bleakly, he realized the truth. Because of darkness and dust, old Jessup had not noticed his disappearance. Like Shem and himself, perhaps the powderman and his niece had slept.

The leader spoke harshly.

"Take that gun off him."

None of the horsemen moved. One shifted uneasily in the saddle.

"You git it," he answered. "I ain't crazy to git too close—not while he's got that thing on him."

Dan grinned tightly at that fear and respect of the man with the rifle for Colonel Colt's gun.

The leader cursed. "Ya yaller dawg. I'm the only man in this outfit. Wasn't for me, we never woulda took the wagon." His horse moved toward Dan's. "Slim, keep a bead on him. I'll get that gun."

The other said, "Make him throw it to ya—"

"Ya damn fool—an' shoot me while he's doin' it! That gun could fire six times afore—" He cursed exasperatedly. "Not on *me*, ya fool! Keep that rifle on him!"

His horse was within reach of Dan. Dan turned his head, gauged the circle of rifles. Then he made his gamble. Abruptly, he slumped in the saddle, fell, sidewise—and rolled squarely between the two horses. It was a split-second chance. Fearing to hit their leader who now was almost on top of Dan, the others held their fire. Dan scrambled to his feet. Then a horse's rump struck him, knocking him sprawling.

He rolled, came up with the revolver blasting. A horse whinnied, reared on its haunches. A man screamed hoarsely. All was confusion. Beneath plunging hoofs, he dived for the wagon's shelter. Then rifles seemed to blaze in his face.

Bits of wood, canvas flew into his eyes. The mules bolted and he leaped to the wagon's side, clung to it. For a minute his eardrums shattered with explosions. He attempted to work his way along the rocking wagon. But he couldn't reach the seat. His left hand slipped, and his boots hit the ground, dragging. He grabbed at a lacing-rope, racing alongside the wagon. Then he leaped for the box.

The man on the tongue-mule was gone. And even greater relief swept over him now. For, suddenly, ringing silence filled the night. His assailants had vanished. In a moment he saw why.

As he turned the wagon back onto the trail, a body of horsemen trotted into sight. They were from the train. Dan drew up, and then old Jessup hailed him.

"What'n hell's goin' on here?"

Dan told his story while the captain and his guards listened silently. When Dan admitted that he had been unable to recognize his attackers, the captain nodded. "A train this size has got more brands o' people in it than a big town back home," he said. "We only got one chance—find 'em now."

He rode off with his men, and Jessup lingered with Dan.

"I musta dozed," the powderman said. "Then Betsy give me a shove. 'He's gone!' she says to me. Right off I had a hunch it was skunks after yore guns. So I got the cap'n and his boys." He peered at Dan. "You all right, Gaffney?"

"I've got to find Shem," he said shortly.

With the dog's help they found him a quarter mile back on the trail—lying in his own blood. Blackie whimpered. And

bitter were Dan Gaffney's thoughts as he got a shovel and dug the prairie grave. Doubly bitter, because no matter what his suspicions, he could not even name nor now wreak vengeance upon Shem's murderers. But he promised himself that the score would be paid.

When their task was completed, Jessup brought him to his own wagon for coffee. Dan went reluctantly, certain now the girl would be even more hostile.

He was right. In the moonlight her face appeared ghastly with pallor. He saw how her hand shook as she poured the coffee. She turned her head, slowly. A long-drawn howl had shattered the night. Dan's own lips set in recognition of the melancholy sound. Blackie was mourning the dead Negro.

His eyes met the girl's, and he saw accusation there, burning. He knew. To her, Shem's blood was on his hands. She turned and disappeared into the wagon. Jessup's voice roused him.

"I was jest waitin' for her to git to sleep," the powderman said. "Gaffney, listen to what I got to say."

Tim, the helper, had moved to his side. It came suddenly to Dan that both men were regarding him with troubled eyes.

"YOU'RE in plenty trouble, Gaffney," Jube Jessup said. "Yore black's dead, an' you almost been kilt yore own self. And mebbe you know where it was yore trouble come from." At Dan's sullen stare, Jessup continued, "Yep, I reckon it coulda been them Jayhawks. They're a hellin' bunch. An' them an' that red-skinned Cactus is thicker'n fleas."

"But it's worse'n that," Jessup went on. "Tonight I learned somethin' you don't know, I reckon. This here is a two-mile long train. It's so long I betcha you ain't got no idee who's up near the head o' it. Back here, a man don't know nothin'."

He leaned forward.

"Ace Murdock's up there—travelin' heavy," he said. "He's got a load o' pistols—same model he tried out on that U. S. inspector. He's goin' to Californy to sell them pistols."

Dan's jaw set.

"Murdock an' Cactus an' them Jayhawks—that's a big passel o' bad uns," Jessup said. "I'm tellin' you—yore hand is beat. I've knowed Sam'l Colt for years. He wouldn't ask you to git kilt for them guns." His words came sharply at Dan. "In two days, we're comin' to Fort Bridger. You know what that means. Some o' these wagons is turnin' off there to Oregon. Most o' the rest is takin' the upper trail to Californy. Not many is takin' the Fremont-Fitzpatrick run south to San Bernardino."

He added harshly, "Not many of 'em, outside you an' me—an' Murdock an' Cactus an' that Jayhawk bunch. That's the company, barrin' a few other wagons, that you'll be travelin' with. You better act fast. Sell yore pistols to the Mormons when we git to Salt Lake—afore Colt loses his guns an' you git kilt!"

As Dan made no answer, the powderman asked, "Ain't it better for the Mormons to git the pistols—'stead of the Jayhawks or the Injuns?"

When Dan answered his voice was stubborn.

"The pistols are going to San Bernardino," he said. "I've got a brother out there needs them bad. If it comes to shooting to get them there—then I'll shoot it out. I beat Murdock at a target; I'll beat him to kill. I know his guns. At the test, his barrel burst. My guns are what's needed where I'm going. I'm going to get them there."

Silence, then Jube Jessup spat.

"I jest figgered to warn you."

Dan grinned bleakly.

"You're a fool, boy."

"Back home they used to say I was a shooting fool." Dan smiled at that.

Then, abruptly, the powderman slapped his Irish helper across the back. Both laughed.

"Hell," Jessup said, "I reckon I'm a fool too—but damned if I ain't goin' with you." He shook his finger at Dan. Now his manner indicated that what he was going to say would come as a surprise.

"Since you're bound to go, I'll tell you somethin'," he said. "I jest learned it from the council. A rider's come in from San Bernardino Valley. He says they've discovered silver there. The council ain't tellin' the whole train. They don't want

it broke up no more than it's goin' to be at Fort Bridger. They figger they got enough to worry about right now—what with half o' the train goin' farmin' in Oregon an' the other half goin' huntin' for gold around Sacramento."

The old man shook his head. "I'm tellin' you about the silver—'cause I know what it means to you."

And Dan knew what it meant. After his long struggles in lower California, Matt had the chance to strike it rich. Dan thought of how those Mexican raiders would scourge the valley now, of how desperately his brother would need protection. . . . His frown deepened.

No Mormon would get these pistols—or Murdock, Cactus, or Jayhawks. Colt's guns were going to San Bernardino and he would get them there. . . .

But later, when the captain and guards returned without having found his assailants, Dan realized the full truth of Jessup's warning. For his guns, men had tried to kill him. He never doubted that they would make the attempt again.

III

TEN miles out of Fort Bridger it was Jim Bridger, himself, who met them. The famous scout and buffalo hunter rode down the full length of the train, and Dan had the chance to see him. Tall, long-haired, grizzled, he sat a pad saddle, minus stirrups. The fringed shirt, buckskin leggings and moccasins seemed to authenticate those legendary exploits which had fired the imagination of the entire East.

Here was the white man with two Ute wives—whose every word was religiously attended by all trail captains and western commanders. Old Jim Bridger who, folks said, could smell an Indian five miles downwind.

When Bridger came to the powder-wagon, he painstakingly spelled out the words painted on its side. And when Dan explained the nature of his own cargo, the scout's eyes kindled.

"I heerd 'bout them Colt-guns," he exclaimed. "I seen a galoot had one o' 'em at Laramie. Then an' thar I says to myself, 'Bridger, ye damn ol' buzzard—yore buffler gun warn't nothin'. That Colt-gun now—thar's a real shootin'-iron. With a gun like that ye could kill six red 'uns ever' day afore breakfast!'"

Dan now did what he knew Colonel Colt himself would have done—presented a revolver to this lone Virginian, who, beginning life as a St. Louis blacksmith's helper, had ended by becoming one of the greatest single forces in America's development of the West.

Bridger was pleased as a child with a new toy. He took in Dan's instructions for loading, cleaning. He asked countless questions, then concluded by inquiring Dan's destination. When Dan informed him, Jim Bridger listened attentively. At mention of the Fremont-Fitzpatrick and Old Spanish Trail route, the scout's face clouded.

"Ye're headin' into bad country," he said soberly. "The Shoshones are dancin', and the young bucks are raidin' out thar." His bushy brows contracted. "An' that ain't the wust of it. Ye got to be keerful ye don't git off the trail."

His voice contained a somberness that held them all—even Betsy Jessup who stood watching the scout wonderingly.

"Ye cain't cut west too quick," Bridger said. "Make a mistake an' ye'll land plumb in Death Valley. An' if that happens. . . ." He spat expressively. "The Valley's a real death-trap. On the south is the Panamints an' north-east is the Funeral an' Black Mount'ins. The little water thar is salt. Furnace Crick is the water-run. The heat's so turrible it'll cook yore brains. An' thar hain't but three men in this country could ever find their way out agin."

When Dan explained his reasons for making the trip, Bridger nodded. "I heerd they found silver out San Bernardino way," he admitted. "An' Gen'l Kearny niebbe beat Flores at Los Angeles—but that won't keep them greasers quiet now. But if'n my brother was out thar, reckon I'd do like ye, too." He patted Dan's shoulder. "And I hain't forgittin' ye give me this here Colt-gun, son. Mostly, everybody comes to the fort—one time or'nother. I'll be watchin' for news of ye."

When he was gone, Dan and Jube Jessup exchanged glances, but neither commented. Both knew their decision remained unaltered. Then something oc-

curred that left him wholly surprised. It happened as Jube turned back to his own wagons.

"Maybe you'd like to have supper with us."

His eyes went to the girl's face. She was not looking at him but her cheeks were red with self-consciousness.

Dan hesitated. "I don't want to trouble you."

"It won't be any trouble."

He followed, thoughtful. It was her first gesture of friendliness since that first day. What had prompted it? Not a changed attitude toward him personally or his mission. Was it clearer understanding of the difficulties to be encountered after they left Fort Bridger? Realization that, regardless of her feelings, both soon would be banded together against a common danger?

Yet Dan whistled as he joined them, rubbing Blackie's nose. No matter for what reason, her gesture was encouraging. Since their meeting, he had realized the truth. There was no other girl for him. All through the meal he stole glances at her.

Fort Bridger's rough mountain post on the Black's Fork, with its cabins and stock corral, saw the dividing of the wagon train. Painted Shoshones, naked to breech-clout, clutched blankets around them, looking on. Dan noticed how Betsy's eyes widened as she studied the silent, squat figures—dark-skinned even for redmen. Something about their peculiar, somber pigment struck him familiarly. Some time elapsed before he placed it.

Dan recollected the curious redness of Cactus' leathery skin—skin so smooth the beard grew but sparsely. He turned. A group of men were walking toward him.

Several were the wagon owners who were taking his own route. Others younger, dissolute-looking, he recognized as the unmarried and self-styled Jayhawks, who had been drinking and carousing ever since their arrival at the fort. He stiffened as he saw Cactus accompanied by Ace Murdock.

SEEING Ace Murdock for the first time since the test at Colonel Colt's armory gave Dan an odd sensation. Against this unfamiliar background, it was as if he were a stranger. Wind and dust of the plains had altered the promoter's dandified appearance. His goatee was untrimmed. Though set jauntily the beaverskin was battered; the long coat discolored. Glare had transformed the narrow eyes into mere glittering slits.

He greeted Dan with a nod.

"Looks like we'll be a pretty small train—now the others is gone," he said. "We'll have to kinda stick together, Gaffney."

A man put in, "Lucky we got a real guide. I hear that country's hell."

Murdock said, "We're payin' the guide ten dollars a day. That's the standin' rate. Everybody chips in. We come for your vote."

Dan watched him, silently.

"Cactus here," Murdock said. "He's the guide. And we're damn lucky to get him. He knows this country. He ought to know it. He's part Injun."

And Shoshone . . . it came to Dan with conviction. Anger gripped him. How could he doubt that it was Cactus and the Jayhawks who had jumped him and killed Shem? Or that they were hand-in-glove with this man who was making a journey of three thousand miles for the sole purpose of out-stripping him? The Jessups and himself would be at the mercy of this outfit, and it gave him a feeling of helplessness. But at the moment he could see nothing to do about it.

"What's your vote?" Murdock asked.

Dan's face was grim as he produced his money.

His feelings underwent no change that night when he dropped in on the Jessups. To his surprise, the old powderman had retired. Dan was about to return to his own wagon when sight of the girl's face checked him. Reddened eyes told him she had been weeping.

"Jube isn't sick, is he?"

Her voice was low as she answered, "He—he hurt himself. His shoulder. It's—twisted."

Dan saw how quickly she turned her face away.

He frowned.

"How'd that happen?"

Jessup's helper, Tim, came around the wagon. "Somebody hurt him," he said shortly. "A man come 'round here while I was away, botherin' Miss Betsy. Mister Jessup told him to git out—and he grabbed

Mister Jessup's arm. He twisted it bad. The old man fainted."

Dan felt his body stiffening.

Tim hung his head, shamefacedly. "I woulda took after him. But Mister Jessup wouldn't leave me do it. He said Miss Betsy had to have one man around here."

Dan asked quietly, "Who was the man?"

The girl said, "No, Tim. Don't—"

"Murdock they calls him," the Irishman said. "Ace Murdock. 'Twas him done it."

Dan didn't look at the girl. He turned and walked down the line of wagons—there weren't more than twenty left now. He knew exactly where he would find Murdock. And this was one time he could be certain he had the right man. From the fort's cabin saloon came the sound of shouting and laughter. He reached the door, halted. He had heard the *pat-pat* of padded feet following him.

"No, Blackie," he told the dog. "Home, boy."

Then he went in. The room was filled with men. Murdock stood at the rough bar—a board laid across two kegs. He was pouring himself a drink, when he turned his head and saw Dan.

"Howdy, Gaffney," he said. "Have a drink."

Then he saw Dan's face and abruptly set the bottle down.

Dan moved toward him until their bodies almost touched.

"You made a mistake today, Murdock."

Understanding leaped into the other's eyes. His lips twitched. "You wouldn't be sweet on that girl, would you—"

He went backward over the bar, overturning bottles and bringing up against the wall in a mess of shattered glass. His hand raised to his nose. He knew it was broken. Blood dripped on his fingers. Dan Gaffney stood there facing him.

Murdock got up, spattered with his own gore. His hand darted to his holster. But he never got the gun out. A savage figure had sprung from the corner of the room and now towered over him—long hair fluttering, grizzled face murderously frozen. A scalping-knife rested against Murdock's heart.

"Hand over that gun," Jim Bridger said. "Dan, forgit this 'un. I hain't liked his smell since he hit my fort." As if it had been no more than a toy, he snatched Murdock's pistol. "Come in here agin, you—an' I'll cut yer heart out!"

Then he swung on the other men in the room. Some were Jayhawks. Cactus stood scowling in a corner.

"Dan Gaffney here's my friend—mark that," Bridger shouted. "He's the brand this country needs. I cain't say the same for many o' ye. If I hear he's been fouled on the trail, then I'm comin' to settle his score. Mark my words, all o' ye!"

He flung open the door, shoved Murdock bodily out. Then he turned to Dan and said, "Name yore pizen, son. I want to hear the story."

When Dan finally left it was with amazement for western friendships. But it did not alter his problem. He was going to travel a rough road in the company of men whose natural enmity for him would be intensified by realization that his wagon carried a sizable fortune in guns. Fervently he wished that Betsy Jessup was not going to be along.

He paused at her wagon, and a white face thrust out at him.

"How's Jube?"

"He's sleeping," she answered. "And —and you. . . ?" He heard her voice tremble, he thought with tenderness.

Dan said, "Murdock's sorry. He won't trouble you any more."

The girl gasped. "He really is sorry?"

Dan couldn't help smiling. "I reckon he's sorry now." Then he said good-night and went to his own wagon.

BENEATH the copper-colored sky parched land reflected wave upon wave of shimmering and blinding heat. To Dan Gaffney, riding the tongue-mule now, the days and weeks had become but a mile by mile descent into the heart of a seething furnace. Fort Bridger, the south trail around Great Salt Lake, were no more than a memory in a brain dulled by monotony, heat.

And ever the country was changing.

Pudgy creosote, sand-cherry and glistening poison-ivy had sprung up and on the horizon rose gaunt, splintered peaks, to his red-rimmed, dust-stung eyes, assuming the most freakish shapes of erosion. The faint and narrow trail, with an occasional half-buried wagon wheel or a steer's sun-

whitened skull, heightened his sense of unreality. Even the hissing dust, to his uneasy senses, seemed to whisper of danger. . . .

Far ahead rumbled the wagons of Murdock and the few other emigrants. Dan knew that a broken axle, the loss of a couple of his exhausted mules, meant one thing. He would be on his own. Of the twenty wagons Murdock and his men drove eight. And even the remainder had shown no desire to remain long in proximity to Jessup's powder. Only at night were they welcome in the wagon-ring.

The old man's injured right arm had stiffened with a persistence that not even heat ameliorated. Impossible for him to raise it from his side, he had mournfully informed Dan, "Hell, I can't even lift a rifle. Tried, but it warn't no good."

Dan understood. If trouble came, there was only himself and Tim. . . .

Determination to get his cargo to San Bernardino had become an obsession. Here, where burning earth and sky reduced all life to an empty, meaningless waste, running Colt's guns to San Bernardino seemed his sole reason for existence. The laborious making of those revolvers in the cramped brick armory now seemed like the creation of his own body. Putting them in the hands of Matt and his oppressed countrymen—bringing protection for the weak against the lawless—had become his life's goal. Across the barren drifts, where the dust-devils swirled, San Bernardino beckoned. Mile upon alkali-choked mile, he drove on for its green valley.

Once Jessup voiced the doubt that now was never absent from Dan's mind.

"What proof we got that half-breed ain't trickin' us?" His dust-caked features scowled. "Seems like we been headin' south one hell of a time."

Dan was silent. His talk with Jim Bridger had led him to believe that before now the southward trek should have turned sharply west. But yesterday at midday a simple test, learned as a boy, had convinced him otherwise. He had held his watch flat on his palm, face upward. Thrusting a small stick upright at the watch's edge and the outer end of the hour hand, he turned it until the stick's shadow fell along the hour hand. Then, with the hand pointing toward the sun—directly along the noon-shadow—he found the south. It jibed with their present route.

That Ace Murdock might only be biding his time appeared highly probable. Delivery of Colonel Colt's revolvers automatically would seriously depreciate, if not actually wipe out, the value of Murdock's own inferior weapons. As Bridger had said, the fame of Colt's .44's already had reached the west. The Jayhawks, whom Dan was convinced had killed Shem, had proved their willingness to strike for such a prize.

The motionless, slitted eyes alongside that now curved and broken nose warned Dan. Murdock's obvious and deliberate ignoring of him was in itself a threat. He was not the man to forget such an injury.

Would his vengeance take the form of another out-and-out attack upon him? Or was the half-breed Cactus, as Jessup hinted, slowly but steadily leading the entire train into some schemed-out rendezvous with death?

The trail now had become unbelievably difficult, and the powder-wagon was literally being nursed along. As Dan thought of old Jessup and the girl—the incredible trek they had made with that perilous cargo—his lips set grimly.

When time came for the noon-day meal, he slid from the mule with relief. He noticed with growing curiosity that the sky had taken on an odd and unusual redness. One of Jessup's oxen began to paw the ground and bellow.

He was frowning at the strangeness of that horizon when he heard Betsy Jessup's sudden little cry.

He turned, barely repressing his own surprise.

AS if materialized from thin air, six figures mounted on calico ponies were trotting toward them. Short, thick-set, dark-skinned, the riders' naked, paint-streaked bodies and feathers gave them a fantastic uniformity. Dan noted the flint knives and lava-glass tipped arrows. He watched them, remembering Jim Bridger's warning... They were Shoshones.

One taller than the rest raised his hand, dismounted.

"How, *cola*. Me, Yellow Snake," he

said, extending his fingers with an unmistakable up-and-down motion. Dan understood—they had come for presents.

He glanced at Jessup, Tim, and the girl who had shrunk back against a wagon wheel, white-faced. By his single look he attempted to warn them of the danger of displaying either surprise or irritation. Then he walked to the wagon, the six Indians silently following.

Upon Dan's departure from the fort, Jim Bridger had pressed upon him a ludicrous miscellany of beads, looking-glasses, and cheap bracelets. In return, he said, for the Colt's revolver—articles which at some time Dan might need badly. Now he was grateful for them. He made a selection and beginning with Yellow Snake, distributed a share to each.

An ejaculation from Yellow Snake brought him sharply to attention.

The Shoshone was pawing his presents with an expression of disgust. His manner was oddly like that of a spoiled child. As Dan watched, he tossed his presents to the ground. He raised his closed fist, flung it from him, the fingers opening.

Standing erect, dark eyes flashing, he slapped his bare chest.

"Me big warrior. You give present for squaw. No good for Yellow Snake."

His tribesmen followed his example. Now all stood empty-handed, eying Dan hostilely.

Suddenly, their chief pointed. "Present for Yellow Snake. Good." He indicated the revolver in Dan's holster.

"Good present," he repeated and his expression relaxed.

Dan shook his head. He touched the revolver. "No good for Shoshone. White man's thunder-stick. Bad for Shoshone."

Yellow Snake refused to be dissuaded. "Thunder-stick good for white man, plenty good for Shoshone."

For a moment there was silence. Yellow Snake's next words startled Dan. The Shoshone was pointing to the wagon, his expression cunningly triumphant.

"White man got plenty thunder-stick in wagon."

A childish maliciousness was reflected in his tribesmen's expressions. They touched each other, nodding flat heads.

The truth thrust itself upon Dan. He never doubted but that this band of young warriors had come from the head of the train. Nor that, speaking the same tongue, Cactus had failed to acquaint them with the assurance that this poorly guarded wagon contained "thunder-sticks" enough for all of them. His gaze went to Jube Jessup's frozen face, Tim's set scowl. Betsy's eyes met his own, fixed in fear.

Dan turned his head. Jessup's oxen were pawing the ground, lowing. His gaze again went to the sky. Now its sullen, obscured hue startled him. He thought he heard a call from the last wagon far ahead. His eyes strained.

Then his attention returned sharply to the Indian facing him. Yellow Snake strode to the tailgate of Dan's wagon. He reached out, jerked loose the lace-ropes. As the canvas fell back there was revealed the cases of revolvers.

"Plenty thunder-sticks," Yellow Snake said. "Plenty for white man and Shoshone." His dark eyes were gleaming.

Dan didn't hesitate. He realized that this was the showdown. He reached the Indian's side, brushed past him. Back against the tailgate, he stood there. His right hand rested on the gun butt in his holster.

His sudden movement took the Shoshone by surprise. Correctly, and with satisfaction, Yellow Snake had read the fear in the faces of these white travelers. It had increased his arrogance. Now abruptly the situation had changed.

Not dread but cold anger regarded him from Dan Gaffney's level eyes. Uneasily, the Shoshone noted the white man's hand on the "thunder-stick." Uncertainty made him parley.

"Yellow Snake make present for thunder-stick," he said sullenly. "Bring white man plenty fine corn."

Dan's patience, even discretion, had winnowed. Realization that the chances were a hundred to one that Murdock or his henchmen had betrayed them to these savages angered him.

YELLOW SNAKE heard a stir behind him, mutters in his own tongue. Plainly, he understood. His tribesmen resented his timidity. It was the final thing needed to end his doubts. Without warning, he hurled himself at Dan Gaffney.

In that split-second, Dan's gun was out.

The barrel slashed the Shoshone squarely on the chin.

Yellow Snake went down with a groan. His nearest companion snatched free a knife. As he sprang, Dan coolly shot it from his hand. Another came from the side, swinging a flint hatchet. Again the .44 roared—and the hatchet dropped. For a moment, the other four stood transfixed. Their blank faces revealed awe, almost superstitious dread. Dan understood. It was the first time they had seen the same pistol fired twice without reloading.

Yellow Snake was crawling away, the others huddled uncertainly before making the next charge. In a moment, Dan realized, they would rush him. He was about to call to his companions, when he stiffened with wonder.

One of the Shoshones, like a large animal, raised his head—sniffed the air. He flung up one hand, pointed to the south—then spoke rapidly to his fellows.

Dan's own nose filled with acrid, unbelievable hotness. Dully, he saw the Shoshones running for their ponies, dragging the wounded with them. Before he realized it, they had wheeled and were pounding away to the north.

It was then that Betsy Jessup's warning split his eardrums.

"Fire!" she was screaming. *"Fire!"*

The south horizon was a curtain of rolling smoke. Red flickers like heat lightning played over inky, billowing clouds. Now his ears vibrated with a far-off, quivering mutter. Amazedly, he saw the prairie life moving past them—plover and curlews darkening the sky in full flight, bounding antelope and coyote. Now he understood the obscured sun, the lowing oxen. The prairie was on fire.

Old Jessup had leaped to the box of the powder-wagon. Tim attempted to replace him. But the old man thrust him off. The girl climbed up beside her uncle.

Dan mounted the tongue-mule, wheeled his hitch. They were completely cut off now from the rest of the wagon train. But one hope remained—to reach the bare and rocky passes to the west before the fire caught them. Again, with disaster looming over them, his mind switched to Murdock. The fire came from that direction. Murdock and the entire train had been consumed. Or Murdock, with the wind blowing due north, had safely touched off the fire in his rear.

Then all Dan's thoughts riveted on self-preservation. The mountain chain to the west appeared close, but he knew a couple of miles intervened. He laid his whip on his hitch. Ahead was a sight that constricted his heart. The powder-wagon reeled and swayed over the rough terrain. Anger for the old man's obstinacy gripped him. Yet he could understand Jessup's reluctance to abandon the freight, after a haul of three thousand miles.

OVERHEAD, the sky was eerily darkening. The murmur to the south had become a humming as of on-driven wind. Turning his head, he watched the horizon. Now red tongues licked through the black pall. Against his cheeks pressed a wall of heat. His nostrils were dry. Abruptly the mules swerved, and he clutched the wheeler's neck to avoid being thrown. Then he saw the snakes writhing past. High overhead the curlews screamed as they swept by.

The wagons ahead were being lightened. He saw the Jessups' spinning-wheel tossed out, a carpet-bag, then a wooden trunk. Dish pans and a plough followed, a churn, an iron stove. Blackie's excited barking filled the air.

The panic-stricken mules were galloping, wagon clattering and jolting. The stifling air was dulling his senses, making him drowsy. His breath had become labored, his tongue like leather. His eyes burned now, his lids heavy, swollen. When he looked again, his heart seemed to die in his breast. Flame and smoke were roaring from the south—billow upon billow, leaping from parched bush to bunchgrass.

Ahead rose the bare rock of the mountain passes, and he drove for it, rising in the saddle.

Darkness as of night fell—hot, nightmarish, blotting out everything. Terrified animals, no more than blurs, ran haphazardly. He could not see the two wagons. A black wall of furnace-heat was isolating him. Mechanically, he still plied the whip. But dully he realized its uselessness. Neither whip nor effort would avail now. Minutes would tell.

A jolt threw him forward. Unmis-

takably, he felt it—the pound of mules' hoofs on rock. He slid from the saddle, groped through the smoke, grabbing the leader's halter. The animals were plunging and tossing their heads. A harness-buckle struck his face, stunning him. Blood began to trickle into his mouth.

He stumbled over stones, an arm twisted in the reins. He realized he was in one of the passes. He staggered on, half-running—the wagon rumbling with him. Dizziness shook him. His breath was only in gasps. But he could not stop now. Death was at his back. He felt the pass grow hot like a fire-pit. Choking, he swayed against the lead mule, was half-dragged by it. Consciousness came and went in steaming flashes. His ears filled with a rumbling crescendo, deafening him. A sheet of blinding light illumined the canyon. Then all his senses blotted out.

HE was soaking with sweat. Wan sunlight filled his eyes as he sat up. His body was stiff, and the exertion made his breathing short. Sooty sediment covered him. His skin was reddish, sore. Then understanding returned. He could not see the mouth of the twisting path that led back there to the prairie. Rock everywhere alone met his bleared sight. But he understood. Somewhere outside, the line of fire had gone by.

He got to his feet, steadying himself against a boulder. A hundred yards farther up the pass stood the wagon. As he watched, the hitch shied. A lithe antelope, hoofs ringing on rock, clattered by.

He reached his team, seized the lead mule's halter. Forcing himself, he trudged on. Now but one prayer filled him—that the Jessups were safe, that he would find them somewhere farther on, deep in the pass. Once he halted, drank from the water keg now brackish and warm. Then, revived, he hurried along.

Dusk was filling the canyon when he stiffened, hearing voices. Then the trail turned and he saw them. Old Jessup was shouting to him.

Meeting, for a moment all stood silent, regarding one another curiously. Soot-smeared faces each reflected wonder. Ashes fluttered from their clothing. Dan looked at Betsy Jessup and grinned. Old Jessup laughed.

"I don't want to come no closer to Hell than that," he said.

Their talk quickly brought a decision, and a return to the prairie was vetoed. Turning the wagons in the narrow pass would be onerous, uncertain. Recalling his own passage, Dan realized its difficulties—off-shoots had been numerous, on every hand. It was also doubtful that they again could contact the wagon train. He was roused by Jessup's voice.

"You suppose that train was burnt out?"

Dan saw his fixed stare. He shrugged. "If it swept over them—"

"That's right—*if*," the powderman specified. "But mebbe it didn't sweep over 'em. Mebbe somebody set it in their rear, knowin' the off-wind would send it back to us."

Dan nodded, recalling his own speculation. He looked at the girl. Horror was in her round, dark eyes. She touched her uncle, her voice a whisper.

"You mean that man—"

"Hell," Jube Jessup said, "that Murdock would do anything to wipe out Dan's guns."

Her head turned to his own wagon, and Dan saw her shudder. She seemed to avoid looking at him. He knew what she was thinking. That it was his cargo of revolvers—his "murderers' tools" as she called them—that had periled their lives. The realization made him sick.

"Anyhow, there ain't no use gittin' in with that crowd agin," Jessup was saying. "Didn't we have a hunch that guide was leadin' us off-trail?" He nodded. "We figgered we was overdue to turn west anyway. I'm for keepin' on straight up this pass. All we know, the San Bernardino Valley might be right over these here hills. We might as well gamble."

So they pushed on.

When night fell, Dan slept fitfully. Though they were little worse off than before, now they followed an uncharted trail. It was still dark when they roused, resumed their journey. Hours passed before he realized that their path was now steadily descending. The sun was baking the rocks. He yearned for a sight of that green valley which they hoped to find. The mere thought raised his spirits.

He noted the curious slate formations

on either hand, the layers of rock varnish. Then they began to reach sandy level ground. He thought he detected what must be salt rings. And gradually an oppressive feeling was closing around his heart. But he dared not let the thought that was in his mind come fully alive. Not yet. . . .

He looked back. The trail had been so devious that he could not follow its course a hundred yards. There was nothing to do now but go on.

When dawn came again, Dan woke with a start. Heat, fierce, relentless, burned him. In his half-waking, he thought of the prairie fire, bolted up. Then his reddened eyes swept the scene before him—and he saw old Jessup coming slowly toward him.

"One thing's sure," Jessup was muttering uneasily. "This ain't the San Bernardino country."

Dan's lips set, his eyes half-shut in the glare of heat such as he had never known. And the truth was beginning to pound through his aching head. His eyes met Jessup's. Without speaking, both knew. They had gambled—and lost. They were in Death Valley.

IV

THEY appeared to be on the floor of a vast valley of sand. Far as his eye reached were desolate lava stretches and wind-terraced dunes. He saw sparse, dry growths of saltgrass, palo verde, prickly pear. And beyond this arid, dazzling expanse rose the freakish hummocks of changing molten color which he felt certain must be the Panamints. Somewhere behind those grim mountains lay San Bernardino. But no sound stirred his ear. The valley was gripped in a silence complete, impersonal as death.

He raised his head at the dry rustle of a lizard amongst the rocks. He noted how quickly the sweat dried on his skin, became salt. The sun stabbed the base of his nails with pain.

"We ain't got overmuch water," Jessup said slowly.

Dan's gaze met the powderman's. Plainly, as if by spoken word, his look explained their situation.

He watched Jessup go slowly back to the wagon, saw him nod to the silent girl. The very creak of the wagon, the grind of its joints crying for grease, jarred his nerves. Tim moved to his side, a question large in his own eyes. But he must have read the answer on Dan's set face.

Under the flaming sun they moved off, their passing muffled in the dragging sand. He saw how the mules lifted their feet high from that burning surface, rattling harness raising choking clouds of fine, powdery dust that got into his eyes, ears, mouth. His cough grew wracking but he fought off thirst. How long a time they might have to stretch their water supply he could not even guess.

Jessup led the caravan along the eastern side of the valley, hugging the base of what Dan believed must be the Black Mountains. Like himself, Jessup remembered Jim Bridger's description. He was working south for the crossing over to Slate Range. Here, Bridger had told them, was the narrowest stretch of Death Valley.

They rounded the southern end of the valley with the sun directly overhead. The mules were being kept to a walk. The racing of their own hearts told them of the true nature of the strain. A heart weakened by the violent pumping of blood to the body's surface could suddenly stop. Dan felt his skin flushed as if with fever. The swimming waves of heat were distorting the shapes of the mountains.

Jessup had gained the foothills now, was groping for an exit from the valley. He started up the slopes and Dan's hopes lifted. Surely, on the other side of this rock barrier now they would find the green valley.

He frowned. Jessup was backing down, returning to the valley's floor once more. Farther on, he again attempted to find a pass, failed. Dan's slitted, stinging eyes were examining the baffling contour of the hills, yard by yard hunting an exit. Twice, he turned his own hitch up the slopes, only to do as Jessup had done—return to the valley's floor. There was no exit. They were like rats caught in a fiery maze.

Sunset found them grouped in the boulders, dazedly watching the gaunt mountain ranges now ever-changing in violent color like a pinwheel of delirium. Suddenly Dan looked up. Betsy Jessup was coming

toward him. Her face was contorted.

"You brought us here!" her voice was a dry croak. "You and your murderers' guns!" Dan stood rigid, gaping at her wild face.

"But for you, we wouldn't be here!" she shrieked. "Since you came, we've been hunted every mile. Leave us! Go away with that wagon of death!"

Her hand swept from his wagon, clenched. She raised the fist, beat upon his chest. Sobs shook her body.

Old Jessup grabbed her as she fainted. While he carried her to their own wagon, Dan stood there, miserable, shaken. The unreality of the experience was still on him when Jessup returned.

"Don't mind the gal, Dan," he said unhappily. "The heat's got her. I could see it comin' on."

Dan was silent.

"Truth is," the powderman said softly, "she's—well, she's fond of you, Dan. I know it. I can see how she's always turnin' her head to watch you—when she don't think I'm lookin'."

DAN stirred. That first day he had believed the attraction was mutual. The night he had returned from his fight with Murdock, he had been certain of her tenderness. But not now. Now he was sure only that the barrier between them was one which he himself never could remove. Her father's death by a gun, Murdock's persecution—these experiences had left an indelible mark.

Yet, for Dan there was but one course.

At nightfall he sat on the wagon-seat in the stifling darkness, Blackie panting at his side. He watched the large stars come out in the black, heavy sky.

Morning came, with it the savage heat. They moved on, desperation now in everyone's heart. An hour passed, two. Suddenly Dan sat motionless. A man was riding down to them, picking his way through the rocks with the sureness of a mule deer. He led a pack-horse. As Dan recognized the grizzled figure with its long hair, fringed buckskin hunting-shirt, relief filled him.

"My Gawd," shouted Jessup. *"It's Jim-Bridger!"*

The scout dismounted, touched and understanding in his acknowledgment of their enthusiastic greetings. His head shook soberly.

"You hadn't no more'n left when I knowed I'd better git started," he said. "I got to figgerin'. If I waited for word o' ye it might on'y be a fun'ral notice when it did come. I knowed that guide o' yourn. An' I says to myself, 'Bridger, ye ol' coyote, ye'd better find Dan Gaffney afore ye finds his corpse.' Ye see, I ain't forgot my promise to watch out for ye."

His sharp eyes scrutinized them. "I couldn't been so far behind ye. I almost got charred by that fire. On a hunch, I cut off for the valley here. I had them hunches 'bout lost wagons afore." He nodded. "Ye done like I told ye, didn't ye? Ye took the south crossin'. It's a good thing. Ye hadn't done so, mebbe ye wouldn't be alive now."

Then he said something to Dan that made all the men smile.

"I kinda wanted to see ye 'bout my Colt-gun, anyhow," Jim Bridger said, frowning. "I run plumb outa gun oil."

In every face he saw the same question, and answered with a smile. "Sure, we'll git outa this here furnace. I got a trail that'll run us right down into the purtiest green country the Lord ever made. 'Nother thing . . . afore I left, Kearny's U. S. Cavalry come in. I told 'em about yore guns, Gaffney. The Gen'l was real interested—had heard 'bout 'em bein' used down in Texas, so he said. 'Twouldn't be strange if we run into them troopers once we git outa here. Most o' them trails fork into the San Bernardino pass."

They followed him, hearts lifted now. Dan thought that he even saw shame on the girl's face as he looked at her.

With Jim Bridger showing the way, it now seemed as if all of their troubles had ended. Once over the Panamints, and through Slate Range, Dan's journey should be over, his guns at last in Matt's hands. . . .

That night they camped high in the pass, and in the morning went on. Even the heat of the baking rock was cool by comparison with the valley of death left behind. Hope and eager spirit drove them, minimizing every difficulty and task. And on the third morning, they debouched from a draw.

Now Dan saw and thrilled at the ex-

panse of cool and lush green that stretched below, limitless in its bounds and promise. They halted at the canyon's mouth, watching silently, rejoicing.

Dan jumped down from the mule, walked to Bridger's side. Tim was with him. They stood there.

Then he noted Jim Bridger's face. The scout's eyes were narrowed, his face turned to the west. Now Dan saw what held his gaze. A line of eight wagons was halted on the San Bernardino trail.

"It's the U. S. sojers," Tim said.

As Dan watched, a number of horsemen suddenly galloped into view. Then he stiffened. From the midst of those mounted men a white puff of smoke abruptly appeared—like an evil, cottony bloom. A second later he heard the sharp report.

Tim coughed, sank to the ground. Dan's amazed eyes watched his body twitch, lie still. He raised his head at Jim Bridger's shout, "It's them! They've been huntin' for ye!"

The truth hit Dan. Ace Murdock had not perished in the prairie fire. His hand had set that fire off, hoping to destroy them. And now Murdock had come back to finish the job.

THEY took shelter behind Dan's wagon, hurriedly backing it into the canyon and cutting loose the mules. Jessup's powder-wagon was moved around a bend, where it would be safe unless hit by a stray bullet. After the first shot Murdock's forces had drawn off. Dan could see them now. They had dismounted and stood waiting in a gulch. Murdock's soiled beaver hat was clearly visible. At Dan's side, Bridger stirred.

"There's a passel of 'em, alongside o' us," was his comment. "Look at them Jayhawks an'—yep, he's even got a couple o' Shoshones!"

Over the rocks Dan saw gathered together all of the forces that for so long had menaced his cargo of guns—Murdock, Cactus, Jayhawks, as Jim Bridger had pointed out, even a few Indians.

"Now that Tim's finished, we only got three men—no, *two*," Bridger ruminated. "I forgit—Jessup cain't hold no gun."

But old Jessup's left hand could fire a Colt's .44. With three six-shooters going, the odds could be decreased somewhat.

With a word to Bridger, he slipped to the rear and hastily unloaded a case from his wagon. Jessup looked on, nodding.

"I'll show the gal how to load 'em," he said. "She can feed us loaded guns right along. We'll learn that Murdock!"

Betsy Jessup's face was agonized. Dread greater than any personal fear filled the eyes that turned beseechingly upon Dan. His heart misgave him. Fate had made her nightmare come true. She who loathed even the thought of firearms must now, with her own hands, make ready these messengers of death. But he could not help her. Against overwhelming odds, every trigger-finger must keep at its task.

A shout from Jim Bridger roused him.

"Thar they come!"

Men were squirming across the rocks firing, and the canyon filled with the staccato of explosions. Murdock was not firing a rifle—but one of his own revolvers. Dan smiled grimly. The test of arms he and Murdock had waged that day back at Colt's armory at a wooden target had become a death-duel. No government contract hung in the balance, but human lives.

The Colt roared in his hand and a Jayhawk tumbled from a boulder. Bridger yelled and picked off another. A Shoshone came in running, war-cry on his lips. Dan waited till he was forty feet away, then drilled him through the chest. Old Jessup shoved alongside Dan. He growled, "Where's that so-and-so that busted my arm?" and emptied six shots into the charging men.

Jim Bridger was screeching his war-song. Dan could easily believe that this was a familiar scene to the scout—that untold times, in the past, he must have seen such action. His scarred face was distorted with battle-lust.

Old Jube Jessup lay alongside Dan, now placing each shot almost with loving care. He drew his bead, spat—then the .44 thundered. The process was regular as clockwork. Fast as his revolver emptied, Jessup cast it behind him—reaching for the loaded weapon thrust in his fingers by Betsy's shaking hand.

Colonel Colt's worst fear had become a reality. If they were wiped out, three hundred Colt revolvers would fall into the last hands that should have received them.

With these three hundred revolvers Murdock could arm a criminal army of white renegades and Indians.

Here in this powder-reeking canyon they were not fighting simply for their own lives—but for hundreds of innocent lives that might be sacrificed. His guns had been for American settlers. Lost now, turned against them, they could create a holocaust. Dan Gaffney and two men were fighting for the western frontier.

Unvoiced, nor dwelt upon, the thought fired his brain. . . .

BULLETS tore through the wagon, splatted against rock. Bits of canvas, slate chips rained on them. Gun-smoke burnt their eyes. The taste in Dan's mouth grew bitter, rancid. He saw the oncoming horde, triggered without stopping. The uproar seemed to shatter his ear-drums. But now he was certain of one thing. The single-shot rifles could not keep up with the rapidity of their own fire. Then abruptly there came silence. He peered through the blue smoke haze, heard Bridger's cry.

"They got enough! Colt's repeaters is too much for 'em!"

Dan watched the retreat of the men back to the gulch's shelter. He saw Murdock waving a revolver in the air at them. Across the rocks two white men and four Shoshones lay still.

As he waited, Betsy Jessup handed him a loaded revolver. His eyes flashed to her face. But only deadness was there. With the mechanical movement of a sleepwalker, she picked up the empty revolver, moved with it back into the canyon.

Even in that moment of temporary victory Dan was bitter. What would it avail him if they won now—and he lost this girl who for three months had filled his heart?

Jube Jessup nudged him. "Look at 'em now! They've got his six-shooters!"

It was true. Dan saw clearly what was happening. Murdock was opening wooden boxes, passing out his own revolvers. His men were testing, loading them. Dan's heart sank. That ended all hope of equalizing, with their own guns, the enemy's overwhelming numbers.

Bridger began to crawl toward the right. Old Jessup moved to the left. Spreading out, they would offer a more extended line of fire.

"'Twouldn't hurt none if Kearny's troopers was to come 'long right now." It was Bridger's growl.

The attack came with a cold deliberateness that chilled them. Now Murdock's men were not bunched, but advancing in a strung-out line—coming on steadily, rock by rock, in fan-shaped formation. Behind them stood Ace Murdock. Dan saw the arrogantly tilted beaver, the cocked and smoking cheroot. Then the canyon's mouth leaped into an inferno of sound, fury.

He fired gun after gun, till his hands blistered and he was almost blinded by gunpowder. Around him the air whimpered with bullets. Somewhere deep in the canyon a stricken ox bellowed. Everywhere gun-flame stabbed the murk. He heard old Jessup's curse, saw Bridger wiping blood from a fleshed ear. And still the fury of the attack climbed—making the wagon-body quiver, knocking scraps of harness into the air, filling his face with splintered shale and flint. He raised his head, warily.

Out on the rocks came an odd burst of greenish flame. Near it, another. A Jayhawk shrieked, dropped his pistol. Then savage joy shook Dan Gaffney. He realized what was happening. It was what had happened back there that day at Colt's armory. Under pressure, Ace Murdock's inferior revolver barrels were bursting.

He stood up, wild with the thought that this was the showdown. He stumbled out of the canyon. But one thought drove him—to find Murdock. With Murdock wiped out, the rest would flee.

In his rush, he gave no thought to the uncertainty of his footing. As he rose to full height, a figure sprang from behind a boulder. It was the dark-skinned Cactus.

Dan tripped on loose stones, fell.

He shoved himself to one knee, raised his eyes. The Shoshone halfbreed stood directly over him. His leathery right fist clutched a revolver. Slowly, almost tantalizingly, he was bringing it to bear squarely on Dan's chest. The breed's eyes were cruel in their anticipation.

THE hand on the revolver seemed to contract. Instinctively, Dan winced for the coming of the bullet.

Behind him a .44 crashed.

The halfbreed quivered, his whole body

stiffening. A red welt appeared in his face, widened. He shuddered, fell slowly over on his back. Dan watched him through astounded eyes. He got up, turned his head. Then wonder touched him.

At the canyon's mouth stood Betsy Jessup. Her shaking hand held a still-smoking revolver. Above the long and murderous barrel, he saw her powder-blackened face. She was smiling at him, her eyes wet with gentle and merciful tears.

Now he understood. Only love could have made her kill for him—to save his life. The realization swept over Dan, leaving him awed, reverent. Then he turned back to the thing he still must do.

He crept through the rocks. Around him, now and then, he heard the bursting of Murdock's gun-barrels. Carefully, he edged outside the rim of that death-strewn field. Any minute now he might find Ace Murdock. He saw that the attackers were falling back. From somewhere Murdock's shrill curses drove at his men.

Then he stiffened. Above a boulder, he had seen the soiled beaverskin hat. It bobbed in full sight, disappeared.

Dan stood up, in each hand a .44. He stepped around the boulder.

Murdock and two Jayhawks almost ran into him.

Dan's guns blasted. Three guns vomited death in his face. But the Colt's were too fast. One Jayhawk screamed. The other fell without a sound. Murdock cursed hoarsely, dropped his revolver—and died. Then Dan Gaffney was standing there, alone.

Blood trickled into his face, but he did not heed it. He stood there, swaying, Colonel Colt's six-guns still gripped in his hands. He turned them over, regarded them through a red mist. Shem was avenged. Matt would get his guns. A feeling of friendship for these pistols gripped him. Colt's guns were good guns. His hands had helped make them. They had fought their own way. They were the best damned guns on the frontier. . . .

He stumbled back over the rocky field of the dead. With his arm, he wiped the blood from his face. Quiet and peace had come over this scene of carnage. There was no more shooting. Then he heard Jim Bridger's yell.

"They run!" the scout was telling him. "They dropped their tails an' run!"

Friendly arms grabbed him.

GENERAL STEVE KEARNEY'S blue-coated troopers came—but that night, long after the last survivors of Murdock's men had mounted and fled. When the United States Cavalry arrived, it was not as so often it had done—in the nick of time to save some doomed emigrant band. It was to reach a scene now oddly peaceful, where three white men and a girl and a gangling black dog ate their supper around a bright campfire.

General Kearny dismounted, greeting them. Watching the soldier's face, Dan saw amazement there. After he had told their story, Dan got out Colonel Colt's presentation case and gave it to him.

The General's face was a study. He flushed with pleasure as he beheld the workmanship and neat compartments of the rosewood revolver-case. Standing there, a bandage around his head, Dan thrilled to think that he had finally delivered the first part of his cargo. Matt's would be next.

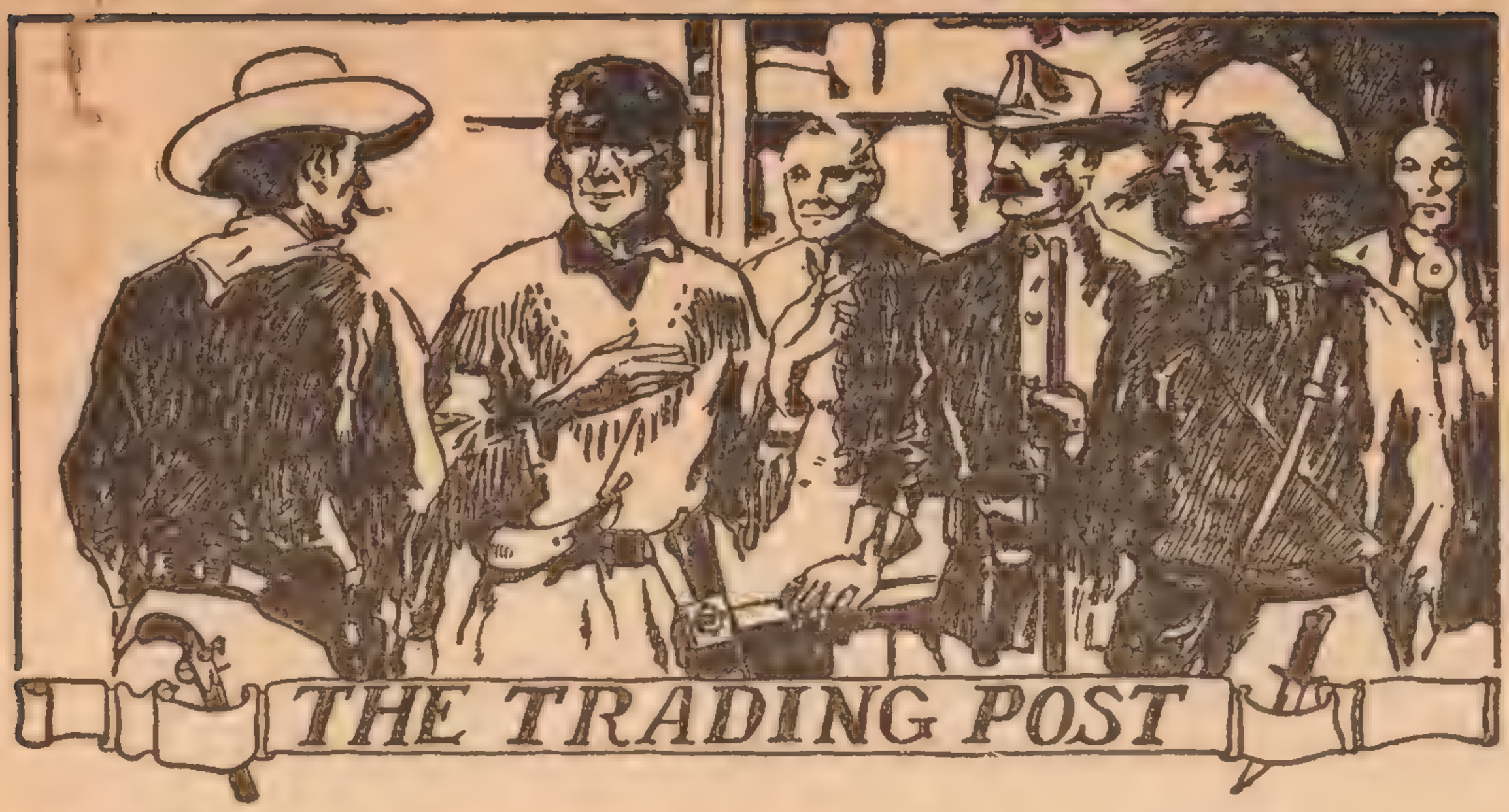
General Kearny was shaking his head. He had come over that field strewn with dead men. And still it was hard for him to believe. His eyes returned to the little group, thoughtfully, then went past them as if searching for more.

"If Colt's guns could do all that," he told Dan, "we want them in the army. You can bet on that." He smiled.

"My Lord, there must be twenty dead men out there. And only three of you!"

Dan felt Betsy Jessup move to his side. Her hand was in his own. Then her voice told him that the barrier was gone forever.

"Not three, General—*four!*" And she said it proudly.



FRONTIER is proud to publish this exciting account of a six-gun duel between an outlaw chief, sided by his hired killers, and a kid deputy. The kid, who later fought on both sides of the law as have so many other famous gunmen of the Old West, is an old-timer now, and this is his story.

Any old-timers wishing to yarn about their early experiences will always be welcome to the Trading Post. In fact, FRONTIER offers $10.00 to the mossy-horn who spins the most exciting, smokiest, yet authentic tale of early days. Each issue will print one or more of these reminiscences, but only the best will collect. Dig down into the war-bags of your memory and give us a tale of the great old days. Mail your stories to THE TRADING POST, care of FRONTIER STORIES.

THE EDITOR.

TIN-STAR MAVERICK

By JOHN VERNON DALEY

I WAS giving marksmanship exhibitions with a Wild West Show when I first entered the Indian Territory. That was in the year of 1886. I was only sixteen years old at that time, and extremely proud of my ability to handle firearms.

Shortly afterwards, when the show went on the rocks at Muskogee, I was deputized on several occasions by the U. S. Deputy Marshal Bill Moody, owing to my swiftness and accuracy with guns, to aid in the arrest of wanted men who were making the Territory their sanctuary those days.

One day Bill told me to report to U. S. Marshal John C. Carroll at Fort Smith, Arkansas, as the Marshal upon his recommendation was willing to give me a commission.

When I called at his office in the U. S. Criminal Court Building, I had a hard time to convince him that I was the person Bill had recommended, on account of my youthfulness.

Finally satisfied, he gave me a Special Deputy's badge, and told me to report to U. S. Marshal Henshaw at Gallup, New Mexico, near Fort Wingate. He said that the marshal had requested him to send a gunman to aid in the arrest of the notorious outlaw Tom Morrow.

He told me that Morrow, who had entered the Territory several years previously, was causing the authorities much trouble by selling guns, ammunition, and whiskey to the Indians—especially the Apaches. This tribe was the worst of the bad lot that "Uncle" had to deal with, as they were escaping from the reservation and raiding ranches along the Arizona

border, killing men, women and children.

Morrow, he said, had quite a following. His headquarters were at the little outlaw-infested town of Haynes, near the Jicarilla Indian Reservation. And not only was he a swift and accurate shot, but a fearless leader. In Carroll's opinion there was small chance, if any, of Morrow being taken alive, and, if I insisted on going on this mission, there was about one chance in ten of me escaping death. He bade me think well before I committed myself.

I don't believe you will find anyone as proud and jealous of his reputation as a gunman. I have known of gunmen traveling several hundred miles in order to meet a man who had acquired this distinction and duel with him, for no other reason than that of demonstrating their superior ability and to satisfy their ego.

I had no incentive of this kind. I had a duty to perform. Yet, I wonder when I look back upon my turbulent life, if at that time egotism didn't have much to do with my eagerness to accept that dangerous mission.

When the Marshal found that I was determined to carry on, he shook hands with me and wished me luck. But I am sure, had he known of my intention, this adventure of mine in that wild country would never have happened.

I had decided even before I left the Marshal's office that this was a one man job, and that I would report to Marshal Henshaw only when I brought with me this notorious outlaw.

As there was plenty of game along the strip at that time, I concluded, in order to save time, to travel Indian fashion—to live off the country. I bought salt, ammunition for my carbine and short-guns, saddled my big roan mare and headed westward.

ALTHOUGH much could have happened on that long journey, through that wild country, nothing did. My good mare put mile after mile behind her, seemingly without effort. And when I reached the New Mexico line, I sent word to Hayes that I was a Special Deputy sent by the court at Fort Smith to bring Morrow back to stand trial.

It was six weeks to the day after I left Fort Smith that I arrived at the little village of Lybrooks, situated in the southeast corner of the Jicarilla Apache Reservation, and ten miles from Haynes. From there I sent word to Morrow, that unless he was too yellow to show, I would meet him that evening in Haynes. If he failed to meet me I would hunt him down like the coward he had proved himself to be, and either kill him or turn him over to the marshal to be sent back for trial to Fort Smith. (At that time the Criminal Court at Fort Smith was the only tribunal in that vast territory.)

It was slightly after sundown when I rode down a dusty road between a double row of shacks in the town of Haynes. Dressed in buckskins, my face burned brown by sun and wind, with my black hair hanging below my shoulders, I could easily have been taken for an Indian, or at least a 'breed.

When I came to a rickety, two-story shack whose crude sign proclaimed it to be the Jicarilla Inn I dismounted, and entered, tensed for action. There were six men standing at the long counter, but I was sure that Morrow wasn't present. But when I noticed the tense attitude of those that were present, I knew I had been recognized. And when their hands started stealing toward their gun-butts, I said:

"I will shoot the first one of you that shucks leather."

When their hands quickly dropped away from their holsters, I knew that my reputation along with news of my coming had preceded me.

But one stocky, heavy-faced, rat-eyed gunman facing me appealed to his pardners.

"You ain't letting this baby-faced gunslick get away with this, are you?"

When he received no answer to his appeal, I saw the murderous look in his eyes deepen. I was watching him with eyes that were grim with purpose when, snarling like a cornered wolf, he went for his gun. His hand stabbed gunward with lightning speed. But fast though he was, I was waiting for him, and shot it from his hand.

"It will be in the guts next time, fellow!" I told him.

Cursing, clutching his fingers, he shouted,

"Morrow will be here shortly to kill you."

There was no mistaking the man that entered the door at that moment, flanked by two of his gunmen. Tom Morrow was a big man, finely proportioned. Thick black hair shot with gray curled about his ears and hung to his shoulders. His nose was long and hooked, eyes steely gray, mouth thin-lipped and wide.

His was the picture of a man like the country in which he lived—wild and pitiless.

Previously he had ruled by his indomitable spirit, and gun-skill, but for several years now he had instructed other criminals, letting them take the risks by doing his bidding. But like most of his kind he was too proud to avoid the issue when carried to him. I had banked on this—and I was not mistaken.

THE gunman on Morrow's right was tall, lean, and buzzard-like with a hatchet-shaped face—black beady eyes over a broken nose and twisted mouth. It was a face that portrayed cunning and cruelty. The one on his left was a 'breed. His cold stare never left my face. His was the face of a killer that has gone far and is well satisfied with himself.

When about ten paces separated us, I said: "Don't come any closer."

They had no doubt expected fear, and were obviously astonished to encounter defiance.

"I have invaded your stronghold, you cowardly skunk, to either kill you or take you back to the court for trial," I snapped at Morrow. "Surrender to a lawful officer, or take the consequences," I said grimly.

He didn't get mad, or go for his guns. His cool gray eyes appraised me with apparent friendliness. His voice was quiet, yet stern with authority.

"So you're the little gunnie who has been doing stunts with a show. And now you've joined the law-dogs in order to hide your rascalities behind a tin star. Not satisfied, you are going around with a chip on your shoulder, and daring folks to knock it off."

This talk was only to give his gunnies a chance. I wasn't fooled, and when the one on his right went into action, I was ready. His eyes had narrowed and his thin face froze suddenly before his hand darted gunward.

I grinned at him and let his gun clear leather before I sent my shots high in his shoulders. But I had no time to throw-off my shots on the 'breed. His gun was leveling when I sent two shots crashing into his middle.

Morrow, who had depended on his gunmen to burn me down, was a moment late. He was caught with both hands on his gun-butts. His forced friendliness had now dropped away. His face was gray, deep-bitten with iron lines. I faced him and sneered openly.

"Shuck leather or elevate," I told him.

His hands left his gun-butts and he raised them breast-high. I made a mistake then, by stepping forward to take his guns. Bill Moody had warned me that Morrow was a fast gunman, dangerous and fearless. That his hands was breast high was of small consequence. When I reached for his guns, he leaped to the left as if his legs were coil springs. His hand flashed to his gun with the same motion, and he fired with deadly accuracy, the two reports blending into one. His first shot hit my left-hand holster, driving the gun into my body with force enough to stagger me. That may have saved my life, as the other shot seared a streak along my ribs beneath my right arm.

I was badly rattled, and more by instinct than judgment I thumbed my gun with the rapidity developed from long training, sending my slugs on a level with his heart. Hate blazed in his eyes as pain twisted his face out of shape; yet no fear was visible. Going down his thumbs still worked the hammer of his gun sending slug after slug into the board floor. Then knees buckling, Tom Morrow lay prone.

No one moved. No one spoke. The silence was so great you could have heard a match drop. Wholly unmindful of my grievous wound, I stared at him through the smoke, grimly, but regretfully. He had died gamely, as was to be expected of an outlaw of his reputation. Turning away I walked to the door, the men breaking away in sullen respect to let me pass.

How to Make YOUR Body Bring You FAME

... Instead of SHAME!

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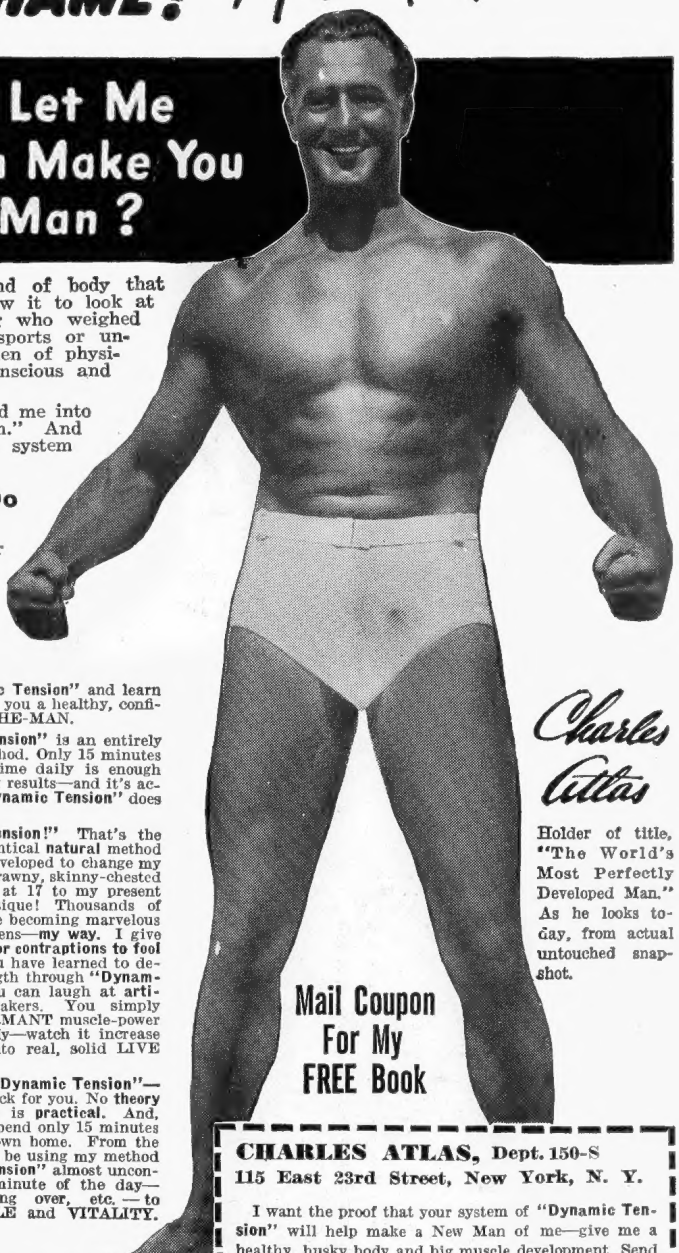

I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

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